

HUGH MACRAE AND THE IDEA OF FARM CITY

RACE, CLASS, AND CONSERVATION IN THE NEW SOUTH, 1905-1935

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ABSTRACT

HUGH MACRAE AND THE IDEA OF FARM CITY: RACE, CLASS, AND CONSERVATION IN THE NEW SOUTH, 1905-1935

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In 1921, Hugh MacRae, a Wilmington businessman, launched his campaign to build Farm City. A fusion of country living and urban amenities, Farm City was to be a demonstration in community planning, an experimental solution to what many conservation-minded reformers saw as the problem of rural life. Based on his experience in colonizing the Wilmington countryside with European immigrants, MacRae undertook a thirteen-year lobbying campaign to build Farm City in hopes that it would show reluctant southern farmers how greater cooperation in economic, social, and intellectual affairs could make rural community life more attractive. Along the way, he enlisted the help of a variety of reformers, writers, and politicians, both northern and southern, who came to believe that the concept of Farm City could point the United States toward a more sustainable future. In 1933, MacRae finally received his chance to build Farm City when the New Deal's Division of Subsistence Homesteads placed him in charge of Penderlea Homesteads.

This thesis chronicles the story of the idea of Farm City through more than a decade of ever-growing popularity and explores the reasons why this particular group of Americans, specifically MacRae, championed such a utopian ideal. The idea of Farm

City was born in the mind of a southern progressive who was concerned with making agriculture more socially and environmentally sustainable. Influenced by the prevailing intellectual trends of the conservation movement, including the Country Life Movement, MacRae held a deep conviction that healthy national development required the establishment of a happy, stable, yeomanry that could effectively husband the nation's resources, but his vision for the countryside was skewed by southern progressive notions of race and class, and he came to see Farm City as a way to simultaneously strengthen the South's racial and social order and pave the way for more efficient resource development.

MacRae's campaign initially attracted support from elements of the national conservation movement, including New South advocates, who largely shared his agrarian convictions. However, throughout the 1920s, as national conservation ideology drifted further away from securing the yeomanry, MacRae increasingly turned to his fellow southerners for support. By the onset of the Great Depression, Farm City had become a southern cause, but it was no longer part of the New South vision. Rather, its supporters now embraced the idea as a way to preserve an agrarian way of life against the onslaught of northern industrialism. In tracing the story of the Farm City idea, this thesis will shed valuable light on the relationship between agrarianism and conservation and illuminate some hidden corners of progressive conservation ideology in the South.

INTRODUCTION

RACE, CLASS, AND SUSTAINABILITY

In 1921, Hugh MacRae initiated a campaign to build the ideal community. He called it Farm City. It would be the perfect blend of country and city, with the social and technological advantages of urban life and the space and independence of rural life. In his community some three hundred families would be settled on small farms with long-term mortgages, given training in scientific agriculture and co-operation, and encouraged to develop an agrarian society. Farmers would share advice and counsel, cooperate in marketing and purchasing, and make decisions democratically, casting their economic lot with the entire community. The settlement would contain a community pond, public river access, public woodlots, and public pasturage. There would be playgrounds, ball fields, and a community center built around a village green with a library, school, museum, and inn. The community would also have a creamery, cannery, machine shop, pine distillery, and basket and crate-making factories.¹ It was, in essence, Hugh MacRae's utopia, and he hoped it would lead to the reorganization of rural life in the South.

¹ *Charlotte Observer*, 30 July 1922.

This is the story of Hugh MacRae and his campaign to build Farm City. A businessman and engineer from southeastern North Carolina, MacRae was, by 1921, one of the nation's foremost authorities on land settlement. Between 1905 and 1910, he had established six colonies of mostly European immigrants in the abandoned farmlands and swamplands around Wilmington, and, according to virtually all the writers and politicians who visited them, they were an outstanding success. Following World War I, MacRae's colonies had attracted the attention of prominent academics, politicians, journalists, and other reformers, who were eager to find a solution to what they saw as the problem of rural life. Capitalizing on his growing popularity and eager to apply what he had learned from his experiments in colonization, MacRae enlisted the help of many of the nation's experts in conservation, country life, and city planning to build a model community that would change the way farmers organized and cooperated. His campaign to build Farm City took him from corporate boardrooms to the state legislature and, eventually, the halls of Congress. It attracted the interest of many well-known politicians, journalists, academics, and other progressives. After more than a decade of lobbying, MacRae received his chance to build Farm City when the New Deal's Division of Subsistence Homesteads placed him in charge of Penderlea Homesteads.

If this was a story strictly about Farm City, however, it would hardly be valuable. The Farm Cities Corporation folded within two years of its incorporation, and Penderlea Homesteads was somewhat less than the rural utopia MacRae envisioned. He resigned after just one year as manager. This thesis tells a more important story: the story about the *idea* of Farm City. While it is organized around the experience of Hugh MacRae, who was the driving force behind Farm City, this thesis also traces the ideological

evolution of other supporters in order to understand why so many leading reformers came to support a project that, with hindsight, seems at best overly idealistic and at worst totally misguided. In his 1922 book *The Story of Utopias*, writer, regional-planner, and social theorist Lewis Mumford, wrote that utopias are historical products. They get their “form and its color from the time in which it is written.”² The ultimate objective of this thesis, therefore, is to analyze the form and color of Farm City in order to better understand the historical context in which it thrived. In the process of recreating the utopian vision behind Farm City, it will shed valuable light on the relationship between conservation and agriculture and the direction of progressive conservation ideology during the transitional decade of the 1920s.

This thesis divides the campaign for Farm City into four time periods and places each period within the context of the broader conservation movement. The first chapter covers the first period, which includes the origins of the Farm City idea. It details Hugh MacRae’s colonization experiments around Wilmington and explores their ideological relationship to the broader conservation movement in an ultimate attempt to answer the questions: how and why was the idea of Farm City a product of the New South? Chapter two focuses on the rise and fall of the Farm Cities Corporation in order to understand why so many leading Progressive conservationists and Country Life reformers staked their names and reputations on such a southern utopian dream. Chapter three picks up after the collapse of the Farm Cities Corporation and discusses how the campaign for Farm City turned into a sectional debate over the future of the conservation movement. Chapter four explores the establishment and failure of Penderlea, the ultimate realization of the Farm City idea. The story of Penderlea is the dénouement in the story of the

² Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), 1.

campaign for Farm City, and in the final chapter, it will serve as a focal point in a larger discussion on the dissolution of the Farm City idea.

MacRae's initial campaign for Farm City in 1921 united the nation's foremost authorities in Country Life, conservation, and city planning, sparking enthusiasm from all sections with its promise of a new era in rural development. Gifford Pinchot, first chief of the U.S. Forest Service and the current Republican candidate for Pennsylvania Governor, signed on as an adviser to the project, while his friend and conservation cohort, former U.S. Reclamation Service Director Frederick H. Newell was its chief consulting engineer. The advisory board also consisted of: conservationist George Bird Grinnell and reclamation experts Elwood Mead, H. T. Cory, and C.J. Blanchard; leaders of the American Country Life Association, including Kenyon Butterfield, E. C. Lindeman, Olive D. Campbell, and University of North Carolina rural economist Eugene C. Branson; several prominent journalists, including *World's Work Magazine* editor Albert Shaw, *Progressive Farmer* editor Clarence Poe, and Ray Stannard Baker; and some of the world's leading authorities on city and town planning, including John Nolen, Thomas Adams, Philip Foster, and Dugald MacFayden. In all, some 50 well-known reformers signed on as advisors to Farm City. This thesis, however, will largely confine its analysis to the discourse of this core group.

So why did this seemingly disparate group of progressives come together to support such a utopian dream? What united them behind the idea of Farm City? The answer can be found in the ideological depths of the conservation movement, at the nexus where concepts of race and class were spliced onto a concern for sustainable resource development. Although Farm City meant different things to different people, promoters

were generally motivated by the fear that industrialization and urbanization threatened to upset a balance between urban and rural areas, agriculture and industry, and producers and consumers. They grew concerned not only that the nation was losing its farmers but also that the land was losing its husbandmen, and they became involved in the Country Life Movement as a way to improve the standard of living in the countryside so that the population could be stabilized on the land. While they promoted educational and health reforms and greater efficiency in rural governments, churches, and agriculture, they held Jeffersonian visions of widespread home-ownership and of democratic communities rooted in a sustainable relationship with the land. However, as World War I sped up the industrialization of the countryside, these men and women began to lose faith that greater efficiency and a healthy rural democracy could coexist. In search of a solution, they began to openly criticize the doctrine of economic progress that efficiency had come to embody, and they called for an alternate path to happiness for the nation's farmers that was not limited to increasing purchasing power. At this crossroads, they saw planned communities like Farm City as a way to secure a better balance between efficiency and democracy in rural life.

Elements of what historian David Danbom refers to as “romantic agrarianism” animated this group of reformers, as they believed that farming provided “moral, emotional, and spiritual benefits” to the individual, but there was also an environmental perspective to their philosophy.³ Criticizing the destructive tendencies of large, capitalist farms on soil and forest resources, they believed that independent, home-owning farmers, with the proper education and the right kind of community, could best husband the

³ David B. Danbom, “Romantic Agrarianism in Twentieth-Century America,” *Agricultural History*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Autumn, 1991), 1.

nation's resources. And because yeoman farmers would fulfill their social and intellectual needs in their local community, they would work to counteract the materialistic tendencies of Jazz-age America that, they believed, led to environmental exploitation and waste. In their minds, securing the yeomanry was necessary to achieve a more sustainable economic development.⁴ Due to the centrality of the yeoman in their philosophy and their persistent efforts to preserve what they saw as America's frontline conservationists, they championed a system that can best be described as conservation agrarianism.

Although the idea of Farm City united reformers from all sections who were concerned with better resource use, the heart and soul of its support lay in the South, where the progressive vision took unique form. Since the publication of Arthur Link's 1946 article "The Progressive Movement in the South," historians have attempted to expand understanding of the uniqueness of the southern wing of the Progressive Movement. While historians have since agreed with Link's identification of southern progressives as essentially urban, professional, and middle-class, they have become divided over several of its key components, including—most importantly for this thesis—the role of agrarianism. Was agrarianism—essentially the desire to maintain a rural, agricultural society—part of the progressive mindset in the early twentieth century? Or was agrarianism the traditional counterforce to a new urban-oriented outlook, the conservative element that the progressives sought to overcome? This debate forms one

⁴ It must be noted that these reformers did not use the term "sustainable," as the term came into common usage only in the 1980s, but this thesis argues that the term can be applied retroactively to what they were trying to accomplish.

of the central historiographical challenges to studying the progressive movement in the South, and it is a debate that the story of Hugh MacRae and Farm City can help inform.⁵

In many ways, Farm City was the product of what Dewey Grantham, among others, has identified as the defining characteristic of southern progressivism: the attempt to reconcile progress and tradition. Southern progressives were generally optimistic about the future and sought to use industrialization to modernize its economy, but they

⁵ Largely building on C. Vann Woodward's assertion that progressives "joined hands" with former Populists, George Tindall, in his *Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945*, drew a direct link between the agrarian reformers of the 1890s and the progressives of the early twentieth century. In his view, "Southern progressives, in their battles against monopoly and the corporations, still looked back to the agrarian arcadia, to an economy of small property, independent farmers, storekeepers, and at least relatively small-scale manufacturers." Many of the urban-oriented reformers who pushed such changes were "under the spell of an agrarian mystique" that led them to distrust the corporate dominance of modern America. Jack Temple Kirby, in his *Darkness at the Dawning: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (1972), essentially agrees with Tindall, writing that "The most potent force for southern reform lay in the frustrations and yearnings of the rural and small town masses." Populism, "while ultimately defeated, . . . won significant victories and set ideological precedents" that formed the roots of southern progressivism. Kirby divides progressive thought into two strains. On one hand were the "decentralizing, democratic, agrarian and localist interests of provincial America," and on the other the "urban-based, professional-minded, bureaucratizing and centralizing mode of thought." These two strains were united by such common goals as black disfranchisement, anti-trust legislation and education in the progressive crusade.

Since the 1970s, historians have come to challenge these basic assumptions about the movement. Instead of it containing two parallel strains of thought—agrarian decentralists and urban-industrial centralists—Dewey Grantham identifies only the urban-industrial centralists as the genuine adherents to the Progressive Movement in the South. For the most part, rural-oriented farmers and agrarians were the traditional conservative force that contended with progressives. Building on Sheldon Hackney's study of Populism and Progressivism in Alabama, Grantham asserts that the roots of southern progressivism were not in the Populist movement. Rather it developed in reaction to populism by individuals who "accepted the basic assumptions of the New South program of regional progress through rapid economic growth, industrialization, and a more diversified economy." While the story of MacRae and Farm City supports this stance, it also draws attention to the rural vision held by urban-oriented progressives and the conservationist motives they held. William Link continues this assumption with a more nuanced description of the two competing ideological forces in the South. "Southern progressivism should be understood as a clash between radically divergent views of the social contract," he wrote in his *Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*. On one hand were the "southern traditionalists, located in farms, villages, and small towns," who desired "community" in its local sense and were suspicious of outside interference. These people were the inheritors of the populist tradition. The progressives, on the other hand, were paternalist reformers who forged in their own minds an enlarged sense of community that called for more regional and national reforms. "They saw solutions through the expansion of coercive state intervention" and embraced the centralizing trends of the American political and economic systems. For the historiography of southern progressivism, see Arthur Link, "The Progressive Movement in the South," *North Carolina Historical Review* (Apr., 1949); Dewey Grantham, "The Contours of Southern Progressivism," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 86, No. 5 (Dec., 1981), 1035-1059; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 369-195; Sheldon Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

hoped to accommodate this change without abandoning the South's more "desirable values and traditions," including its racial, political, and class hierarchies.⁶ As a motivating force, Grantham concludes, southern progressives "looked toward the creation of a clearly defined community that would accommodate a society differentiated by race and class but one that also possessed unity, cohesion, and stability."⁷ Farm City was a product of this philosophy. For some southern progressives, like MacRae, Poe, and Branson, the idea of Farm City was the idea of the South. It was a symbol for and a microcosm of a larger, cohesive community that they hoped to build, one in which cooperation and scientific expertise would solve the ongoing "problems" of class, race, and resource development. It promised to modernize rural southern life and rebuild southern agriculture without sacrificing the tradition of local autonomy and without endangering the social order, which meant not empowering black farmers and not strengthening farmers' class consciousness. Indeed, Farm City was an outgrowth of the southern progressive social vision fused to a concern for sustainable resource development.

As the 1920s gave way to the 1930s and agricultural industrialization continue apace with rural poverty, support for the idea of Farm City became increasingly confined to the South. MacRae found fewer allies among northern conservationists and more among southern politicians, journalists, and academics. This followed an ideological shift in the national conservation movement away from the goal of preserving the yeomanry and toward land preservation, multi-purpose river development, and fish and wildlife conservation. The agrarianism that had generated early nationwide support for

⁶ Dewey Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), xvi.

⁷ Ibid, xvii.

Farm City was increasingly at odds with federal agricultural and conservation policies that ignored the social benefits of farming while continuing to support, if indirectly, the rise of agribusiness. However, the goal of preserving the yeomanry survived in the South, and Farm City attracted southerners who were searching for ways to accomplish that goal.

Yet, in the interwar years, the idea of Farm City underwent something of a philosophical change. It no longer appeared to be part of the New South vision but rather a rejection of it. Upset by deteriorating rural conditions, its southern supporters believed that the South had sacrificed its rural population in the name of urban industrial progress, and they liked the idea of Farm City as a way to restore the rural-urban balance. Despite its supporters' claims that it was not utopian, the idea of Farm City gradually drifted out of the realm of real possibility and into the realm of what can only be described as utopian. That is, it was increasingly grounded in an idealism that was disconnected from reality. By the 1930s, a new wave of southern thinkers became attracted to the idea of Farm City, but they were not necessarily searching for alternate ways to organize farmers to bring them into the New South fold. Rather, they pushed the idea as a way to undermine urban-industrial progress and form a new rural culture that was largely independent of the urban-dominated economy. In short, Farm City had indeed become a utopia.

Historians have, thus far, shown very little interest in Hugh MacRae and the co-operative community movement. By far, the most comprehensive treatment of MacRae's efforts to date came in 1959 when Paul K. Conkin published *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program*. In his meticulously researched examination of the

Division of Subsistence Homesteads and other similar community-building New Deal programs, Conkin gives much credit to MacRae for stimulating an interest in organized rural communities. He uses one of his fourteen chapters to discuss MacRae's experience in creating communities, placing it in the context of his management of Penderlea.⁸ This important book laid the groundwork for the few scholarly treatments of MacRae that followed. Marcia Synnott, in a 1987 article published by the South Carolina Historical Association entitled "Hugh MacRae, Penderlea, and the Model Farm Communities Movement," provided the only other article-length examination of Hugh MacRae. She sharpened and expanded Conkin's focus on MacRae's dispute with Interior Secretary Harold Ickes and his ultimate dismissal over the direction of Penderlea's leadership.⁹ While these scholars have uncovered some important aspects of MacRae's life and career, they have not attempted to place him in the context of conservation or southern thought.

The story of MacRae and Farm City can help illuminate some dark corners of conservation historiography. For much of the twentieth century, historians virtually ignored the South when discussing the national conservation movement. In 1985, for example, the Natural Resources Council published the latest edition of its *National Leaders in American Conservation*. Included among its nearly 500 leaders were just 19 southerners from the former Confederate states. There was no one from Alabama or Mississippi and only three each from Georgia and South Carolina.¹⁰ In a 2005 essay,

⁸ Paul K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1959).

⁹ Marcia Synnott, "Hugh MacRae, Penderlea, and the Model Farm Community Movement," *The Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association*, (Columbia: South Carolina Historical Association, 1987) 88-110.

¹⁰ Richard Stroud, ed., *National Leaders of American Conservation* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985).

Mart Stewart argues that the South has escaped the attention of environmental historians largely because southerners subscribed to a different philosophy regarding man's relationship with nature, "one that does not take humans out of nature, and that is more informed by an agricultural experience than a wilderness one."¹¹ Historians have recently expanded scholarly understanding of the conservation movement in the South, but much work needs to be done. In 2009, Stewart's article was incorporated into a reader edited by Paul Sutter and Chris Manganiello entitled *Environmental History and the American South*. Its editors hoped to explore how scholars have "collectively defined the field and what it suggests about its neglected topics."¹² Although the essays barely scratched the surface of the progressive era, one of its contributors Stewart posed a provocative question: what would environmental history look like if the South had produced a philosopher as eloquent and passionate as John Muir to champion the cause of agrarianism during the progressive era? While this thesis will not attempt to answer this question—MacRae was certainly no John Muir—it will contribute an answer to the related question: what was the relationship between agrarianism and conservation? The story of Hugh MacRae and Farm City can bring that relationship into focus.

In linking MacRae to the conservation movement, this thesis seeks to contribute to conservation historiography by approaching it from MacRae's southern perspective. Such a perspective brings the agrarianism of the conservation movement to the forefront, as historians have too often allowed it to either sink into the background or disappear altogether. For example, Samuel Hays, whose *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*

¹¹ Mart Stewart, "If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian: American Environmental History West and South," *Environmental History and the American South*, 197.

¹² Paul Sutter and Chris Manganiello, "Introduction: No More the Backward Region: Southern Environmental History Comes of Age," *Environmental History and the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 3.

(1959) is still a standard in the field, ignores both the South and agriculture, characterizing the movement in terms of public lands, forestry, mineral rights, grazing rights, and reclamation of arid western lands.¹³ Similarly, David Coyle's *Conservation* (1957) also overlooks the progressives' emphasis on agriculture and soil conservation, claiming that the issue only began to attract widespread attention after 1933 with the onset of the Dust Bowl. Without discounting the centrality of western development to the movement, conservation historians must find room for the South and agriculture, for they help bring to light parts of the conservationist vision for the nation that forestry, reclamation, and public lands cannot.

This oversight can be attributed to historians' unwillingness to consider the Country Life Movement as part of conservation. Despite the fact that several prominent conservationists served on the Country Life Commission, as well as Roosevelt's view that Country Life and Conservation were "two sides of the same policy," historians have not yet analyzed them together, which has led to an incomplete reconstruction of both the conservation and country life philosophies. While conservation historians in the Hays mold have emphasized efficiency over social goals, historians have also tended to mischaracterize the motives behind the country life movement, leading to highly critical interpretations of the rural reformers. Taking the point of view of the farmers, David Danbom, for example, called the country life movement "nothing less than the demand of an ascendant urban-industrial America, backed by an increasingly activist state, for an organized and efficient agriculture that would adequately supplement it socially and

¹³ Samuel P. Hays *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 2.

economically.”¹⁴ In a less critical but more confusing assessment, William Bowers called the movement a “complex mixture of rural nostalgia, the desire to make agriculture more efficient and profitable, humanitarianism, and economic self-interest.”¹⁵

More recently, however, a few historians have begun to view the Country Life Movement from the conservationist perspective, and they have found different motives. Scott Peters and Paul Morgan, for example, have argued that the Commission on Country Life “was one of the first high-profile, comprehensive attempts to outline a broad-gauge vision of sustainability in American agriculture.”¹⁶ While these authors do not explicitly emphasize its connection to conservation, their assessment of the motives behind the Country Life Movement is accurate. The story of Farm City brings the two strands of conservation and Country Life together and draws attention to the common vision of those who aimed higher than simply making agriculture more efficient and profitable.¹⁷

Using MacRae’s southern perspective, this thesis also seeks to contribute to two ongoing historiographical debates over the conservation movement: the issue of efficiency versus democracy, and the issue of continuity versus change, both of which are loosely related. Similar to the historiography of the broader progressive movement, conservation historians are largely divided between those who viewed the movement as a

¹⁴ David Danbom, *Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1979), 74.

¹⁵ William Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900-1920* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1974), 3.

¹⁶ Scott Peters and Paul Morgan, “The Country Life Commission: Reconsidering a Milestone in American Agricultural History,” *Agricultural History*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (Summer 2004), 289.

¹⁷ In her book *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (2007), Sarah T. Phillips notes the ideological similarities of the Country Life and the conservation movements, but she is more interested in pointing out their differences. Maintaining that the Country Life approach to reform through education was fundamentally different from the conservationists insistence on government regulation, she is unwilling to give the Country Lifers much credit in achieving lasting conservation reform. While this may be partially correct, this thesis is not concerned with lasting achievements. The importance of the Country Life Movement, for the purposes of this thesis, is that it helps reconstruct the agrarian vision of the original conservationists, so that it can be contrasted with later visions for the nation.

scientific movement motivated by a desire to improve efficiency and those who viewed it as a democratic movement motivated by a desire to protect the people against the monopolists. An article written by Leonard Bates in 1957 entitled, “Fulfilling American Democracy: the American Conservation Movement, 1908-1921,” typically represents the latter. Citing the hostility of Pinchot and others toward corporate waste and extravagance, as well as their unwavering support for the smallholder, Bates characterized the movement as “an effort to implement democracy for twentieth-century America, to stop the stealing and exploitation, to inspire high standards for government, to preserve the beauty of mountain and stream, to distribute more equitably the profits of this economy.”¹⁸ Hays, on the other hand, argues that the conservation movement should be viewed from the standpoint of applied science. Instead of securing democracy, conservationists were primarily concerned with improving efficiency and reducing waste, which often meant tacitly supporting the corporations, for it was the large corporations, rather than the small producers, that could afford to adopt long-term conservation policies. The significance of the conservation movement, Hays contends, is in “the role it played in the transformation of a decentralized, nontechnical, loosely organized society, where waste and inefficiency ran rampant, into a highly organized, technical, and centrally planned and directed social organization which could meet a complex world with efficiency and purpose.”¹⁹ In his *A Search for Order*, Robert Weibe argued for a similar “organizational synthesis” for the broader Progressive Movement.

The campaign to build Farm City and the challenges it faced brings into focus this debate over democracy and efficiency. While it is true that nearly every leader in the

¹⁸ J. Leonard Bates, “Fulfilling American Democracy: the American Conservation Movement, 1907-1921,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Jun., 1957), 57.

¹⁹ Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 265.

conservation and country life movements placed efficiency high on the list of priorities, they ultimately differed over the meaning of the term “efficiency,” especially when it applied to rural life. Bringing the Country Life Movement into the analysis can help shed more light on this discrepancy. Some saw it primarily from an economic standpoint and used it to promote better business methods among farmers and secure greater cooperation between industry and agriculture. Others defined it in terms of community organization. To them, “efficiency” meant maximum cooperation between farmers in a community for economic, social, religious, and economic goals. MacRae and the supporters of the cooperative community movement were part of the latter group. They emerged from World War I with their social goals unfulfilled, and they saw community organization and planning as a hopeful means of attaining them.

The challenge inherent in community organization encapsulates the clash between democracy and efficiency. MacRae and his allies genuinely believed that community planning would lead to better economic, social, and intellectual life on the farm. Moreover, it would help foster a democratic culture in which farmers decided amongst themselves, through their cooperatives, the best way forward for the community. Yet, in order for an outside agency or philanthropist to initiate such a movement, they eventually realized that it was necessary to impose the vision of a benevolent paternalist, who would essentially dictate the level of efficiency the community needed in order for it to survive. Although planners insisted that community members take over operations once it was viable (indeed, this seems to have been the case in MacRae’s colonies), many community members chafed at such paternalism. The experience of Penderlea highlights the problem of imposing ideas of community efficiency from the outside.

Conservationists suffered from the same challenge inherent in planning that doomed the administration of Penderlea. They, too, realized that in order to secure a better democracy and ensure wise and equitable resource use, it was necessary to impose the vision of a benevolent paternalist, or more accurately, a cadre of trained “experts.” This conflict was most evident in the western reclamation projects, but it also extended to the entire conservation program. Someone had to decide the amount of waste and the level of efficiency that was acceptable. Someone had to set the goals of the program and hold stakeholders accountable, but when stakeholders did not agree with that someone and felt that their ambitions were being suppressed, their voice stifled, they, like the Penderlea settlers, were much more likely to lash out against the program. From their perspective, the program was anything but democratic. Indeed, the Penderlea experience can help highlight these fundamental challenges to conservation.

This thesis will also contribute to the debate over continuity and change. Historians of the consensus era, many of whom were adherents to the Hays school, largely emphasized the consistency of conservation philosophy over time, noting that the ideas of efficiency continued to dominate policy for decades. Coyle, for example, drew a relatively straight line with the ideas of forestry and river-development from the Progressive Era to the New Deal and beyond, although he did note the rise of soil conservation and wildlife protection during and after the New Deal. Donald Swain, whose *Federal Conservation Policy, 1921-1933*, was the first monograph to focus on the 1920s, sees mostly continuity from the Progressive Era. Buying into Hays’ efficiency argument, he sees the dam-building, forestry, and mineral conservation as part of the

steady march of efficiency that set the stage for the New Deal, although he, too, notes the rise of soil conservation and wildlife protection.

In a more recent and more critical argument for the continuity narrative, Donald Worster has examined the western reclamation projects in his book, *Rivers of Empire*, and paints conservationists such as Frederick H. Newell and Elwood Mead as agents of empire, willing participants in the steady march of capitalist exploitation into the West. Worster largely dismisses the democratic, agrarian rhetoric used by these conservationists, arguing that their actions belied their words. Pointing to the eventual outcome of the reclamation projects, he maintains that they were less interested in achieving social goals than they were in improving efficiency and boosting agricultural output.²⁰ This contention is somewhat troubling. Worster is unwilling to see the settlers themselves as agents of empire, intent on boosting their capital and expanding their landholdings, and the conservationists as genuine paternalists, struggling, albeit unsuccessfully and perhaps misguided, to reconcile efficiency and democracy.

Following the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, historians began to look at the conservation movement through a different lens and saw it largely as a clash between utilitarians, who wanted to develop resources, and preservationists, who wanted to preserve them. In his influential *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Nash notes the growing popularity of national parks and outdoor recreation and focuses on the role played by John Muir during the Progressive Era in challenging the utilitarian viewpoint.²¹ Though he challenged the traditional continuity narrative of the consensus

²⁰ Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 169-190.

²¹ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, originally published in 1967).

era, Nash does not argue that the conservation philosophy fundamentally changed from the Progressive Era through the New Deal. Rather, he succeeds in reorienting the continuity narrative away from efficiency and towards wilderness. Stephen Fox's *John Muir and His Legacy: the American Conservation Movement*, largely continues this view, arguing that Muir, rather than Pinchot, had the most lasting philosophical impact on the conservation movement.²² This group of historians has largely succeeded in casting the nation's policy of resource development as the ongoing dialogue between utilitarians and preservationists.

More recently, however, historians have more forcefully challenged the continuity arguments from both the utilitarian and wilderness standpoints. Mark Harvey's *Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement*, argues that the change largely occurred after World War II and, specifically, in 1956, when wilderness advocates succeeded in defeating the Bureau of Reclamation and its plans to build a series of dams in the Colorado River valley, thus securing an ideological victory that vanquished the utilitarian phase of the movement and paved the way for the Wilderness Act.²³ Paul Sutter contends that the preservation side of the conservation movement was not as homogenous as historians have acknowledged and that significant changes had taken place in the movement during the interwar years. In *Driven Wild*, Sutter traces the intellectual development of a group of progressive conservationists who gradually shifted their ideology away from utilitarianism and toward preservationism, eventually founding the Wilderness Society in the 1930s. He found that these men were not recreation

²² Stephen Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy: the American Conservation Movement* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1981).

²³ Mark Harvey, *Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).

enthusiasts. Rather, they were revolting against the burgeoning outdoor recreation movement and the automobiles that brought hordes of people into the woods. To these conservationists, Sutter maintains, wilderness areas would provide an alternative to national parks and recreation areas.²⁴ These historians have provided much-needed nuance to the preservation side of the conservation movement.

In one of the few recent attempts to challenge the continuity narrative of the resource development side, Sarah Phillips examines the conservation policy of the New Deal and argues that it represented a significant break with previous conservation policy. In *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (2007), Phillips views the New Deal as a new direction for conservation policy because “it took as its foremost concern the environmental imbalance of inhabited rural areas.”²⁵ From her perspective, New Dealers, through the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Agricultural Adjustments Administration, the Rural Electrification Administration, and other agencies, sought to use conservation policy to improve the lives of rural residents, and she uses the term “agrarianism” to describe their motivations. While many of these reformers were concerned with making agriculture more profitable and rural life better, Phillips does not recognize the fact that the agrarian views of the New Dealers were fundamentally different than those of the Country Life conservationists who came to support community planning. Whereas the community planners hoped to keep rural residents on the soil and largely independent of the volatile wage economy, New Dealers ultimately sought to incorporate them further into it. The difference is not insignificant.

²⁴ Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).

²⁵ Sarah Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 9.

Clayton Koppes has come the closest to an accurate distinction of the different eras of conservation history. In a cursory look at the entire conservation movement in the twentieth century, he has argued that there were three parts to the progressive conservationist philosophy—efficiency, equity, and esthetics—and that different parts came to dominate different eras. In the 1920s, the focus largely shifted to the efficiency side, while during the New Deal, equity reemerged as a significant factor, and after World War II, the esthetic side grew in importance. Fortunately, Koppes has brought attention back to the social goals of the progressive conservationists, but further in-depth examination is still needed.²⁶

Indeed, despite the modest advances made in the field of conservation historiography, there remains much to be investigated and interpreted. Since the consensus era of American historiography, few historians have been willing to write a comprehensive history of the movement. They have found such a task daunting. As one historian explained it: “The chronic struggles, the staggeringly copious documentation, the entanglement of broad or basic issues with ephemeral situations and clashes of personality, and the continuous blending with intricate maneuvers in national and local politics make the evolution and significance of conservation in modern America a forbiddingly intractable subject of study.”²⁷ The shifting meanings of the term “conservation” have further frustrated efforts at a comprehensive analysis. Over the first four decades of the twentieth century, politicians used the term liberally to support a variety of goals for resource development, leading to confusion among historians trying

²⁶ Clayton Koppes, “Efficiency/Equity/Esthetics: Toward a Reinterpretation of American Conservation,” *Environmental Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer, 1987), 127-146; see also Koppes, “Environmental Policy and American Liberalism: the Department of the Interior, 1933-1953,” *Environmental Review*, Vol. 7 (1983).

²⁷ Max Nicholson, *The Environmental Revolution* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), 177.

to piece it all together. William Howard Taft once remarked that the term was so abstruse that people would support it no matter what it meant.²⁸ As a result of such ambiguity, historians have avoided comprehensive interpretations and instead focused on discrete episodes in conservation history, such as the Ballinger-Pinchot Controversy, the Teapot Dome Scandal, and the Hetch-Hetchy Dam Controversy, or definite time periods, especially the Progressive Era and the New Deal. Surprisingly few attempts have been made to trace the philosophy from the Progressive Era through the 1920s to the New Deal. An updated synthesis is sorely needed, but before such a work can be undertaken, there must be more research done, especially on the role of agrarianism.

This thesis seeks to use the story of Hugh MacRae to examine the agrarianism of the conservation philosophy as it changed over time. It does not pretend to be a comprehensive analysis of the conservation movement over the course of four decades, nor does it presume as much for the movement in the South, although such an endeavor is also needed. Rather, this thesis offers a valuable intellectual case study of a man whose agrarianism was born of the conservationist impulse in the late nineteenth century and remained consistent from the Progressive Era to the New Deal. Indeed, Hugh MacRae and his campaign to build Farm City provide a convenient baseline against which changes in conservation philosophy regarding the small yeoman farmer can be measured. When he began his campaign for Farm City in 1921, he was able to attract support from the remnants of the progressive conservation movement who still hoped to preserve the yeomanry, but by the New Deal, that vision had been lost. From his perspective, it is clear that the conservation philosophy underwent marked changes from the Progressive

²⁸ Referenced in Henry Jarrett, ed., *Perspectives on Conservation: Essays on American's Natural Resources* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), viii.

Era to the New Deal, and this thesis is concerned solely with that perspective. It is hoped that this thesis can contribute to the discussion on the role of agrarianism and the South in the conservation movement.

CHAPTER 1

HUGH MACRAE, CONSERVATIONIST IN THE NEW SOUTH

In the spring of 1908, a crowd of sixty businessmen, journalists, and politicians, filed off the special coach that had carried them nine miles from Wilmington, North Carolina, and they listened to Hugh MacRae, one of the city's leading citizens, explain what he was about to unveil to the public for the first time. For the past three years, he told them, he had been experimenting with a strategy to develop the swampy pinelands and abandoned plantations of the Cape Fear River delta. He implored them to leave behind their nativist beliefs and their agricultural dogma as he guided them through the community of St. Helena.¹

For most of the day, the visitors wandered around the 4,000-acre property where 215 Italian immigrants were busy plowing, hoeing, sowing, harvesting strawberries, tending fruit trees, and clearing stumps. The farms were arranged in ten- and twenty-acre rectangles, each one circumscribed by a row of fruit trees and planted over with a wide array of fruits and vegetables. The visitors were amazed at the sudden transformation of the Wilmington countryside. "These industrious people," one observer noted, "are

¹ Robert Vincent, "North Carolina's First Great Colonization Movement," *Charlotte Observer*, 26 April 1908.

converting [the virgin pine woods] into a modern Arcadia.”² Moreover, the farm houses—sturdy-built, three-room bungalows—were “marvels of cleanliness.” In the small town center that bordered the railroad station, there was a church, a store, a blacksmith shop, and a bake oven, all designed and built by the colonists themselves during the preceding two years. Though they were hard at work, they seemed healthy and happy.

St. Helena was one of six colonies that MacRae had established in the Wilmington countryside by 1908. At Castle Hayne, a few miles south, some 150 Dutch and Midwestern farmers were engaged in the same kind of intensive agriculture on ten- and twenty-acre farms that the Italians were practicing at St. Helena. Nearby, more than 200 Poles were cultivating 6,000 acres at the Marathon colony. To the west, at New Berlin, German immigrants were experimenting, among other things, with 110 different varieties of strawberries, and at the Artesia colony, English settlers were putting the finishing touches on their new farmsteads. In all, the Carolina Trucking Development Company controlled nearly 100,000 acres of land on which they hoped to settle as many as 50,000 colonists.³

At the end of the day, as the visitors reloaded the coach that would take them back to Wilmington, fourteen Italian colonists, many of whom spoke no English, blared out the tune “Dixie” on shiny brass instruments. It was an experience they would not soon forget. Before they reached Wilmington, the group of businessmen unanimously and enthusiastically pledged support for MacRae’s endeavors in farm colonization.⁴ On that

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

spring day, the public got its first glimpse of what would soon be labeled the “most famous agricultural communities in the South.”⁵

What the businessmen of Wilmington saw that day was actually a conservationist’s experiment in farmland reclamation. MacRae devised his colonization scheme as a way to reclaim the Wilmington countryside from what he saw as an obsolete agricultural system, based first on slave labor and then on tenant labor, that had robbed the soil of its fertility, thereby destroying the vitality of the land. In order to prevent further waste of soil and forest resources and ensure long-term economic viability for the region, he maintained, resource development must be planned, rational, and socially acceptable. By planning communities in advance of settlement and setting up an infrastructure that would facilitate rational and efficient resource development, he hoped to demonstrate how the South could establish a more economically and socially sustainable system of agriculture.

It is within the context of the progressive conservation movement that MacRae’s colonies can best be understood, as they were the logical outgrowth of a conservation philosophy that had recently begun to generate nationwide interest, but it was a philosophy created by conditions unique to the South. So far, scholars have almost unanimously looked to the West to explain the origins of the conservation movement and have not yet begun to analyze the contributions of other regions, especially the South.⁶

⁵ Edwin Bjorkman, “Hugh MacRae, Builder of Human Happiness: A Study in Agricultural Engineering,” Folder 140, Edwin Bjorkman Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

⁶ Recently, historians have begun to study the environmental history of the South. In 2009, Paul Sutter and Chris Manganiello published a collection of essays entitled *Environmental History and the American South*, in which a number of important questions were raised concerning the interaction of southerners with their environment. However, none of the essays adequately address the contributions of southerners to the progressive conservation movement. Mart Stewart’s essay, “If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian: American Environmental History West and South,” comes to closest to such an examination, but its value

While this thesis will not presume to explain the entire conservation movement in the South, it will offer an illuminating case study of one of the most conspicuous conservation minds of the early progressive era, Hugh MacRae. In order to understand how MacRae and other conservationists came to embrace the Farm City movement, it is necessary to look at his intellectual development during the Progressive Era and the influence of the conservation movement on his philosophy. Such an approach can offer a new, broader way of viewing conservation history and provide a blueprint for a more in-depth study of the South's contributions to the movement.

Like other conservation leaders, MacRae had a privileged upbringing that put him in a unique position to mold the Wilmington area to fit his own vision. He was born in 1865 into a long line of prominent Wilmington citizens that included railroad engineers, politicians, and Confederate officers. His father, Donald MacRae, had amassed a sizeable fortune in public utilities and cotton mills, but he also maintained an obsession with farming that he passed on to his children. Hugh MacRae graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1885 with a degree in mining engineering, and when his father died in 1894, he inherited large stakes in a variety of business interests.⁷ With his newfound wealth and influence, he began approaching the problem of Wilmington's future.

By the end of the century, Wilmington's fortunes were declining. A collapsing naval stores industry and a weakening wood products industry, along with greater competition from other southeastern ports, had reduced Wilmington's once prominent role in the state's commerce. Industry and population were shifting to the piedmont as

lies in the questions it raises about the possibility of a distinctly southern approach to conservation. His study provides important background information but does not begin to analyze the progressive era itself.

⁷ The best biographical details of MacRae's early life are in Bjorkman, 12-16.

cotton mills were established along the fall lines of the major rivers and newly built railroads.⁸ Wilmington had become a one-export port. Its future rested on cotton, and its cotton was being increasingly raised by black tenant farmers.⁹

MacRae's vision for Wilmington's future was shaped by the growing national concern, especially among academics, for the conservation of natural resources. The closing of the frontier and continued population increase provoked discussion over whether the United States could continue resource development under the frontier-era assumption that they were virtually inexhaustible. Although the term "conservation" would not be used extensively to describe this new mindset until Theodore Roosevelt's second term as president, the concept behind it—rational comprehensive planning of resource use—had been gaining influence among engineers since the 1880s, specifically regarding the resources of the West. MacRae's education at MIT proved instrumental in cultivating this new view of resource development in his mind. In 1911, when he was chief of the U.S. Reclamation Service, Frederick Newell, a classmate of MacRae's and one of the nation's foremost conservation leaders, attributed his conservationist outlook to the education he received at MIT. The Institute, he claimed, taught its engineers the value of studying problems not in isolation but within the context of the larger situation. "With a comprehensive and reasonably accurate review of the conditions to be met," he said, "it is then possible to bring to the solution of the problem the principles and methods of engineering and to put into play the constructive ideas which are inseparable

⁸ Alan D. Watson, *Wilmington: Port of North Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 135.

⁹ In 1880, 66.5% of farms in North Carolina were operated by owners; by 1900, half of all farms were operated by owners. In 1880, 32.4% of farms were operated by tenants; by 1900, 41% of the state's farms were operated by tenants. Of these, 67% were operated by black tenant farmers. "Report on the Statistics of Agriculture in the United States at the Eleventh Census," U.S. Department of the Interior (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885); "Census of Agriculture," U.S. Department of Interior (Washington: U.S. Census Office, 1902).

from a technologic education.”¹⁰ According to Newell, the difference between MIT and earlier engineering programs was that MIT emphasized “constructive faculty,” or “the conception that the great work of life is to initiate and to build on correct lines rather than to simply know what others have done, and to imitate those.”¹¹ Upon graduation, Newell and MacRae applied their constructive faculties to different goals.

In the 1890s, Newell became one of the most able of a group of engineers, many of them graduates of MIT, to study the problem of western irrigation under John Wesley Powell. As head of hydrological studies in the U.S. Geological Survey, Newell, along with his close friend and associate Gifford Pinchot, joined the campaign to start a federal program for reclaiming the arid lands of the West through systematic irrigation. In 1902, Congress passed the Newlands Reclamation Act due largely to the efforts of Newell and Pinchot, delivering one of the first victories of Roosevelt’s conservation policy. The Newlands Act established the U.S. Reclamation Service in the Interior Department and gave the new agency the power to collect money from western states to be used for irrigation projects that would speed economic development. Roosevelt named Newell the Reclamation Service’s first chief, and under his leadership, the Service became a significant, if controversial, partner in the economic development of the West. Within a decade, it succeeded in constructing dams and aqueducts that facilitated the settlement of large areas of arid lands in the western states. In this capacity, Newell, along with

¹⁰ Frederick H. Newell, “Reclamation of the Arid West,” *Science*, New Series, Vol. 33, No. 853 (5 May 1911), 682-684.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Pinchot, became a consistent and leading voice for conservation inside the Roosevelt Administration.¹²

In many ways, MacRae's philosophy regarding resource development was nearly identical to that of Newell and other, more prominent, conservationists. Contrary to popular belief, conservationists did not embrace the idea of land preservation and recreation. Samuel Hays describes conservation as a "scientific movement" based on a belief in "rational planning to promote efficient development and use of all natural resources."¹³ They preached the "gospel of efficiency" and urged greater cooperation in all industries in order to eliminate wasteful consumption of natural resources and promote sustainable long-term growth. Though the term did not come into common usage until the late twentieth century, it is clear that the conservation movement was a struggle for "sustainability." Economic development should, to use Pinchot's famous words, provide the "greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time."¹⁴ To direct that growth, they placed faith in trained experts in fields from geology and forestry to agriculture and engineering. Prior to World War I, MacRae certainly subscribed to this new way of viewing resource development. He decried unrestrained competition as antithetical to the public good, and he based his entire enterprise on science and rational planning, including his colonization plans. His ultimate aim was to place rural life in the South on a stable, self-sustaining basis. Single-crop, capitalistic farming by slaves and then tenants

¹² For Frederick Newell's career in western reclamation, see Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 143-177; Edwin Layton, Jr., *The Revolt of the Engineers: Social Responsibility and the American Engineering Profession* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1971), 116-127.

¹³ Samuel Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 2.

¹⁴ See Gifford Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation* (New York: Doubleday, 1910), 48.

were responsible for destroying the soil, and immigration was the means by which this “obstacle” could be overcome and better agriculturalists placed on the land.

Neither Hays nor most other historians have fully explored the relationship between conservationism and agriculture, but it is clear that MacRae was certainly not alone among conservationists in his search for a more sustainable system of agriculture.¹⁵ Pinchot identified the “waste of soil” as “among the most dangerous of all wastes now in progress in the United States.”¹⁶ While Pinchot and others promoted forest management as a way to prevent soil *erosion*, they were equally concerned about reforming agriculture in order to preserve soil *fertility*. In *Conservation of Natural Resources* (1909), University of Illinois agronomist Cyril Hopkins, for example, argued that:

The greatest material problem of the United States is not in the development of the waterways, not in the preservation of forests, and not in the conservation of our coal and iron, important as these all are; but the problem that is vastly greater than all of these is to bring about the adoption of systems of farming that will maintain or increase the productive power of American soils.¹⁷

Conservationists were extremely critical of prevailing agricultural practices, arguing that the frontier mentality of exploitation was destroying the nation’s soil. At the 1908 Governor’s Conference at the White House, considered a landmark of conservation

¹⁵ Reasons for conservation historians’ lack of attention to agriculture are unclear. Perhaps they have followed the assertion of George Perkins Marsh, an intellectual forefather of the movement, that agriculture had been the “principal cause of the destruction of the forest,” and they have continued to see it as something separate from and, indeed, antithetical to the movement to preserve the forests.¹⁵ It is worth noting that while Marsh characterized farming as the enemy of the forests, he also implicitly called for agriculture to become less expansionist and more sustainable. Like many conservationists, he believed that if soil fertility and soil productivity could be increased on lands already under cultivation, fewer forests would have to be cut. The most reasonable explanation for historians’ oversight, however, is that conservationists approached the problem of soil conservation in a much different way than they approached forest management and western reclamation. Many conservationists, including Hugh MacRae, came to believe that the agricultural problem was not so much a governmental problem in need of technical expertise but a social problem in need of social reform. See George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature; or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1864), 325.

¹⁶ Gifford Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation* (New York: Doubleday, 1910), 9.

¹⁷ Cyril Hopkins, “The Conservation and Preservation of Soil Fertility,” in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 33, No. 3, Conservation of Natural Resources, (May 1909), 147.

history, railroad magnate James J. Hill condemned the current agricultural system for its contributions to soil waste. “In all parts of the United States...,” he said, “the system of tillage has been to select the crop which would bring in most money at the current market rate, to plant that year after year, and to move on to virgin fields as soon as the old farm rebelled by lowering quality and quantity of its return.”¹⁸ Developing a more stable agricultural relationship with the land was one of the greatest challenges facing the conservationists, and they began to push for better ways to organize agriculture to make it more efficient and less wasteful.

There were some important differences between MacRae and the national conservation leaders, differences that can be attributed to his southern perspective. First, MacRae retained a faith in private enterprise to achieve conservation ends. He initially believed corporations were capable of putting human welfare above profit, acknowledging that “business methods should make for morality as well as efficiency.”¹⁹ He disliked being called a philanthropist and hoped to prove that colonization could be done on a profitable business model.²⁰ Second, whereas Pinchot, Newell, and Roosevelt viewed conservation in terms of national development and the federal government as the benevolent paternalist that would direct the national community towards those ends, MacRae’s views were more local and sectional. He couched his appeal for conservation policies in distinctly southern terms—agrarianism, race relations, and the New South—

¹⁸ James J. Hill, “The Natural Wealth of the Land and its Conservation,” in *Proceedings of a Conference of Governors in the White House, Washington, D.C., May 13-15, 1908* (New York: Arno Press, 1975, reprint of 1908 edition), 70.

¹⁹ Hugh MacRae, “Vitalizing the Nation and Conserving Human Units Through the Development of Agricultural Communities,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 63, National Industries and the Federal Government (Jan. 1916), 279.

²⁰ MacRae never actually claimed that he achieved that success. He likely spent close to two million dollars over two decades and never boasted of a profit. Bjorkman, “Hugh MacRae, Builder of Human Happiness,” 11.

and he focused his energies on the planned, rational development of the Wilmington area. His community was, first, Wilmington, and, second, the South.

While Newell was tackling the problem of western development, MacRae was applying his education to the problems of southern development. Like Newell, MacRae focused on reclaiming lands for use by small farmers, but uplifting the southern countryside would take more than technical expertise in dam construction. As he came to understand, developing a comprehensive plan for better resource development in southeastern North Carolina would require a degree of social engineering largely unfamiliar to the western conservationists. Indeed, MacRae would have to confront both the exhaustive legacy of plantation agriculture and the rigid southern social order.

MacRae himself claimed that there were two remarks made to him by North Carolina colleagues sometime in the 1890s that left a profound mark on his thinking, both of which help reveal the origins of his colonization scheme. During an engineering excursion in western North Carolina, one colleague declared that Wilmington was a “dead” city “because it had no backcountry to support it.” According to Edwin Bjorkman, who interviewed MacRae extensively in 1928, this encounter “was almost like a conversion... It made him see, to its full extent, the close connection between the condition of those lands and the future welfare of the community to which he belonged.”²¹ Around the same time, according to George Byrne of the *Manufacturer's Record*, MacRae underwent a similar “eureka” moment when he heard another engineering colleague remark, “if the negro was the best laborer in the world the South

²¹ For MacRae's biographical sketch, see Bjorkman, “Hugh MacRae, Builder of Human Happiness,” 13-14.

would be the best and most prosperous country in the world.”²² The fact that Hugh MacRae pinpointed these two comments as turning points in his thinking reveals the extent to which his conservation outlook was colored by his southern perspective. In MacRae’s mind, the “race problem” was an engineering problem because it formed the roots of Wilmington’s economic trouble. Black farmers were impeding the proper development of soil resources, and the proper development of soil resources would boost wealth for the Wilmington region. Using his education as an engineer, he sought a comprehensive solution that would not only solve the region’s economic woes but would also remove the perceived threat to white supremacy of an ascendant black minority.

Indeed, MacRae’s experience in the racial struggles around Wilmington informed much of his conservation vision. Indeed, he played a leading role in the 1898 coup d’etat of the city’s biracial Fusion government, and a further examination of this event can help shed some light on his philosophy. The causes of the Wilmington riot, which led to the deaths of at least 25 (mostly black) people, were rooted in the social changes that took place in the region on the heels of Reconstruction. White Democrats of Wilmington, especially the established ruling class, which included the MacRae family, felt that their power structure was being increasingly threatened by black Republicans. Although Democrats had successfully “redeemed” the city in 1877, taking control of its government and major institutions from Republican rule, the city’s population had developed a substantial black minority. By the 1880s, black culture was thriving in the city. Black citizens had their own schools, businesses, organizations, and institutions,

²² George Byrne, “Hugh MacRae’s Practical Application of Common Sense in Colonization,” *Manufacturer’s Record*, 30 May 1912.

and they soon began to exert their influence over politics.²³ In 1896, with the help of the black vote and growing agrarian discontent, a fusion coalition of white Populists and Republicans took over the General Assembly and made changes to the city's charter that threatened Democratic hegemony, but Democrats were determined at all costs to win the state back in 1898.

Hugh MacRae helped plot the coup that removed the Wilmington Fusion government, although he appears to have played a mediating influence on some of the more hot-headed white Democrats. Harry Hayden identified Hugh MacRae as one of the "Secret Nine" who met regularly to discuss plans to retake the city after the election. A group of vigilantes, called the Red Shirts, had conducted a campaign of intimidation in black communities in the months preceding the 1898 election, and the night before the election, they planned to burn the press of a black newspaper for publishing an inflammatory editorial. Worried that such an act would discredit the election, MacRae called a mass meeting of white citizens to quell the potential violence. Speakers were in favor of a peaceful transfer of power, and in order to mollify the more violent element, members of the Secret Nine introduced the "White Declaration of Independence," in which they declared that "we will no longer be ruled, and will never again be ruled by men of African origin."²⁴ There was still violence, although it was delayed until after the election. On November 10, white supremacist mobs burned the *Daily Record*, igniting a

²³ For MacRae's role in the Wilmington Massacre, the best source is Harry Hayden, "The Story of the Wilmington Rebellion," in Harry Hayden Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, NC; See also, 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission, "1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report," North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, <http://www.history.ncdcr.gov/1898-wrrc/report/report.htm> (accessed November 27, 2011), 21-30; for a more scholarly discussion on the race riots, see Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); See also David Celeski and Timothy B. Tyson, eds., *Democracy Betrayed: the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

²⁴ 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission, "1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report," 115.

rampage that left at least a dozen, and possibly several dozen, dead or wounded.²⁵

Democrats seized control of the city government, forcing Republicans to resign and, in many cases, to leave the city. The black vote successfully stifled, MacRae was elected Alderman, and the Democrats swept back into office.²⁶

Even with Democrats back in power, MacRae well knew that racial tensions had not gone away with the coup d'état, and he began to see immigration as a way to increase the white population and neutralize the growing black influence. The need to "create a laboring population composed predominantly of white races," he wrote in 1909, was the reason "perhaps of greatest importance to the south" that immigrants should be directed into the southern countryside.²⁷ It was the "most logical solution from every standpoint" to the "race problem."²⁸ According to George Byrne, MacRae initially hoped to entice western and Midwestern farmers to relocate to the South, but he quickly realized that they preferred to farm hundreds of acres, hire laborers, and run their farms like businesses. In MacRae's view, the problem with this approach was that the majority of the labor force around Wilmington was black. So he turned to immigration in order to circumvent the local labor force, which meant importing "thrifty, industrious, and intelligent" European farmers.²⁹ While other progressives across the South set up the legal structure of Jim Crow segregation, MacRae was experimenting with another way to strengthen white supremacy.

²⁵ The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report identified 22 African American deaths.

²⁶ Ibid, 183.

²⁷ Hugh MacRae, "Colonization Opportunity in the Southern States," *Daily Oklahoman*, 27 December 1909.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ George Byrne, "Hugh MacRae's Practical Application of Common Sense in Colonization," *The Manufacturer's Record*, 30 May 1912; For the quote describing immigrants, see MacRae, "Colonization Opportunity in the Southern States."

At some point in his problem-solving approach to immigration, MacRae concluded that settling immigrants in colonies, rather than on isolated farms, offered the best possibility for success. This was a logical decision, as immigration to the South from Europe, as well as from the North, had been successfully carried out on a limited scale under the colony plan since Reconstruction. Attracted by the favorable climate, abundance of water, and cheap lands, these families came from across the nation to establish farming communities on the abandoned or unused farmlands in the South. As early as 1881, one northern newspaper called “the almost continuous stream of ‘colony immigration’” of northerners one of the most “hopeful indications of the condition of the South.”³⁰ Characterizing the South as a new frontier, some publications pushed colonization as “a practicable means of relieving life in a new country of many of its objectionable features.”³¹ In colonies, farmers could lean on each other for survival, while avoiding the infamous southern prejudice against newcomers.³² MacRae had likely observed the attempts at colonization in places like Fitzgerald, Georgia, Fairhope, Alabama, and Independence, Louisiana, and concluded that group settlement was the best method for importing Europeans.³³

³⁰ “Minor Notes,” *Vermont Phoenix*, 2 September 1881.

³¹ “Woodland, Farm, and Garden,” *Forest and Stream*, 13 March 1879; for characterizations of the South as a frontier, see “From West to South,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 February 1896.

³² “Woodland, Farm, and Garden,” *Forest and Stream*, 13 March 1879.

³³ Walter Flemming, “Immigration to the Southern States,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 20 (New York: Ginn and Co., 1905), 285-287; For more on the reasoning behind MacRae’s colonization scheme, see Byrne, Hugh MacRae’s Practical Application of Common Sense in Colonization,” *Manufacturer’s Record*, 30 May 1912; For more on the utopian experiments in the New South, specifically the Ruskin colonies, see Fitzhugh Brundage, *A Socialist Utopia in the New South: the Ruskin Colonies in Tennessee and Georgia, 1894-1901* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Brundage has built on an emerging historiography of utopian experiments in the United States that deserves some discussion at length, as the story of Farm City can help expand it. In his 1950 work, *Backwoods Utopias: the Sectarian and Owenite Phases of Communitarian Socialism in America: 1663-1829*, Arthur Bestor broke with prominent American historians when he proclaimed that antebellum utopians, followers of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier in the 1820s and 1830s, among others, were not escapists with wild dreams of heaven on earth. Rather, they were mainstream social theorists who sought out legitimate ways of reforming society. He downplayed the

Although colonization had been popular in the late nineteenth century, MacRae's approach to colonization was unique. Previous colonization endeavors had been primarily pursued by northerners and westerners wanting to take advantage of the climate and cheap land of the South while enjoying a familiar social life. Southerners merely provided the real estate, and the colony was left to develop on its own, but MacRae was

strength of individualism in America, reflecting that "Individualism seemed incapable of answering the nineteenth-century need for collective action. Drastic reform was the demand, but drastic reform without revolution." However, he argued that communitarianism largely died out after the Civil War, a contention that subsequent scholars would seek to disprove. "Social patterns became so well defined over the whole area of the United States," Bestor wrote, "that the possibility no longer existed of affecting the social order by merely planting seeds of new institutions in the wilderness."

Since the 1960s and 1970s, when thousands of young people flocked to communes in the countryside in search of the good life, scholars have sought to expand on Bestor's ideas with contemporary politics in mind. Peyton Richter published an anthology of utopian writing in his 1971 book *Utopias: Social Ideals and Communal Experiments*, hoping to "promote further discussion of some of the big social issues of our time and shed some light on several of the major problems of social philosophy." In 1973, Michael Fellman published *The Unbounded Frame*, which focused on the Owen and Fourier communities of the 1830s and 1840s as mainstream reform movements, but he took Bestor's argument further, claiming such ideas have never vanished from American thought. "The very basic questions of personal and collective goals, of moral values, of the nature and relationship of freedom and community, so long considered closed...are being reopened and reconsidered...The new utopia is developing this time as a counter-culture, as a repudiation of the values of a society far more structured and confining than antebellum American society." Although they succeeded in dismantling what they saw as the myth of American individualism, this group of writers, however, did not openly challenge Bestor's basic assertion that the communitarian impulse lost its edge in the years following the Civil War. They did not investigate the post-war communitarians.

In his 1989 work *Brotherly Tomorrows: Movements for a Cooperative Society in America, 1820-1920*, Edward K. Spann reexamined Bestor's claim that utopian communitarianism collapsed prior to the Civil War. He gives a half-hearted attempt to disprove that theory by discussing a few post-war attempts at forming co-operative socialist colonies, such as the Ruskin colonies in Tennessee and Georgia, but he depicts the arc of utopian thought as attaining more of a national scope. "By the 1880s," he wrote, "the concentration of industry and the consolidation of economic life had dampened the dream of regenerating the world through model communities and voluntary associations. The apparent lesson of these rapidly changing times was that a cooperative society could be established only by national means on national foundations." He focuses on Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward* (1888) and Lawrence Grunland's *The Cooperative Commonwealth* (1884) as examples of this nationalist trend, but he appears to downplay the many attempts at building localized model co-operative communities.

Robert S. Fogarty's *All Things New: American Communes and Utopian Movements, 1860-1914*, published in 1990, was the first monograph to examine the blossoming of late-nineteenth-century community building, finally delivering the *coup de grace* to Bestor's original position. Fogarty studied a wide range of communities and colonies, created by every kind of social reformer from Christian socialists and anarchists to Theosophists and the Salvation Army, but he did not include the MacRae colonies in his study. Although his analysis ended with the outbreak of World War I, leaving the impression that the movement petered out in the twentieth century, he offers no explanation for why that might have happened. An examination of the co-operative community movement would have revealed that the co-operative community tradition was alive and, indeed, reached its highest level of influence with the federal government, into the 1920s and 1930s.

not solely interested in making money off the land. He wanted to demonstrate a way to create a permanent white countryside that would build up the fertility of the soil and generate produce and wealth for the Wilmington region for generations. His was less a colonization scheme than an experiment in social engineering.

Using the latest science on agriculture and irrigation, he began to investigate the potentialities of colonization. Encouraged by the latest scientific theory that malaria, the historical scourge of the southern coastal plain, was transmitted by mosquitoes and could thus be controlled, he secured options on close to half a million acres of land in the mosquito-infested low country of Pender and New Hanover counties. He hired agricultural experts to test the soil, and they discovered, contrary to conventional wisdom, that the fine sandy loam of the piney woodlands were much more suitable for the growing of fruits and vegetables than the alluvial bottomlands. Next, he hired fourteen civil engineers to design and survey the five future communities and install drainage systems that would ensure maximum yield for all colonists.³⁴ Then he recruited the immigrants.

In what seems like a response to Theodore Roosevelt's challenge to "devise some system by which undesirable immigrants shall be kept out entirely, while desirable immigrants are properly distributed throughout the country," MacRae sent agents to Europe to recruit them directly from their communities.³⁵ Based on their findings, MacRae concluded that the "right kind" of immigrant was "from northern Europe or Italy

³⁴ Vincent, "North Carolina's First Great Colonization Movement."

³⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, "Message Communicated to the Two Houses of Congress at the Beginning of the Second Session of the Fifty-Eighth Congress," *Addresses and Presidential Messages of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 387.

who has lived on the land and will devote himself to agriculture.”³⁶ In MacRae’s view, “agriculture acts as a great filter which quickly separates the scum of the European cities from those who have led the rugged, wholesome life of farmers.”³⁷ Yet, farming was not the only requisite. He wanted immigrants who valued home ownership (but who perhaps did not have the means to purchase the land outright), law and order, and economic security rather than quick wealth.³⁸ In essence, he wanted families who would thrive in small rural communities.

While his expressed objective was to find Europeans who would succeed in the kind of farming he proposed, he well knew that he was constrained by the South’s racial attitudes. He would have to be convinced, and, in turn, convince his fellow southerners, that the immigrants he recruited were fit to be adopted into the “white” ranks of the racial caste system. As Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued, the influx of European immigration toward the end of the nineteenth century forced Americans to rethink their traditional interpretations of race. Americans had long identified Europeans of different regions as being members of different races, but due to the growing popularity of scientific race theories and heightened racial tensions, they began to consider certain immigrant groups as more “white” than others because they displayed certain desirable characteristics.³⁹ For MacRae, the most desirable characteristics were the propensity to be happy in a small, farming community, and to not be black. Still, MacRae was faced with the

³⁶ MacRae, “Colonization Opportunity in the Southern States,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 27 December 1909.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Byrne, “Hugh MacRae’s Practical Application of Common Sense in Colonization,” *Manufacturer’s Record*, 30 May 1912.

³⁹ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). See also David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso Press, 1991); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

challenge of selling the immigration idea to southerners who were reluctant to adopt such an expanded view of race.⁴⁰ Publicly, however, he rejected the idea that southerners were xenophobic, blaming the relative lack of immigration to the South on the low demand for their labor and the prejudice of immigration agencies against the South.⁴¹

MacRae's sales pitch to the Europeans was generous. He offered them easy terms: they could pay whatever they could for the land and a small house, even if that meant nothing, and make subsequent monthly interest-free payments (although he would later charge some interest). The Carolina Trucking Development Company would provide a demonstration farm run by a superintendent and expert advice based on soil surveys and other scientific studies.⁴² It paid them for their labor when they worked on community projects, and it paid them for the trees they cleared off their land.⁴³ Within two years, there were hundreds of Italian, German, Greek, Polish, and Midwestern farmers living around Wilmington in five colonies: Castle Hayne, New Berlin, Marathon,

⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the historical record is inconsistent on whether or not MacRae's goal had always been European immigrants. According to Robert Vincent, who visited the colonies in 1908, MacRae had his heart set on European immigrants and was determined to learn some of the agricultural practices that made European farmers so successful, but Edwin Bjorkman, who interviewed him in 1928, claimed that MacRae had initially attempted to offer local farmers the opportunity to join his colony and that they scoffed at the idea. It should be considered that by the time Bjorkman was writing, the national attitude over immigration had changed somewhat. It would have seemed unpatriotic and disingenuous to bypass one's countrymen for some of the same nationalities had fought against the Allies. Furthermore, Vincent suggests that the group of 60 businessmen did not know what MacRae had been up to, so it seems unlikely that MacRae had been advertising for prospective colonists around Wilmington. See Vincent, "North Carolina's First Great Colonization Movement," *Charlotte Observer*, 26 April 1908; Bjorkman, "Hugh MacRae, Builder of Human Happiness," 19.

⁴¹ For example, see MacRae, "Colonization Opportunity in the Southern States," *Daily Oklahoman*, 27 December 1909; U.S. Senate, Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation, *Creation of Organized Rural Communities to Demonstrate the Benefits of Planned Settlement, Hearings on S. 412*, 14 May 1929, 71st Cong., 1st Sess., 36.

⁴² In doing this, he borrowed a page from the celebrated Seaman A. Knapp who, in 1903, convinced Texas farmers to adopt a boll-weevil-resistant strain of cotton through demonstration. Both Knapp and MacRae believed that the best way to convince conservative southerners to adopt scientific agriculture was by showing them that it could work. For more on Seaman Knapp's demonstration efforts, see Dewey Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 337-348.

⁴³ Vincent, "North Carolina's First Great Colonization Movement," *Charlotte Observer*, 26 April 1908.

St. Helena, and Artesia. Many of them grew steadily. St. Helena, for example, expanded from seven families in 1906 to forty-seven families by 1912.⁴⁴ In order to carry out his racially engineered vision for the countryside, he discouraged the hiring of outside labor, and the property deeds all included a restriction against selling the property to a negro.⁴⁵

The theory behind MacRae's version of group farming was simple. Although there would be community-owned property (school buildings, churches, and community centers), the private-property incentive would drive innovation and productivity. The cornerstone of his theory was home ownership, but he linked the private property incentive of all colonists together through cooperatives. By marketing their produce together, they would be able to produce enough as a community to secure access to mass markets across the east. Such an arrangement would fuel individual innovation by encouraging farmers to experiment on their own land with potentially profitable crops, but it would also encourage them to share their innovations with their neighbors so that they could achieve a sufficient level of mass production. He also encouraged colonists to purchase machinery, seed, and fertilizer cooperatively. This approach to commercial farming, combined with subsistence production for household consumption, would maximize revenues and, at the same time, lower potential expenditures, all while building a community sense that would stabilize the population on the land. It was a plan that MacRae felt could point the way to successful immigration to the South.

When he started his colonization scheme, his philosophy regarding cooperative communities was yet undeveloped. He had ideas about how to settle immigrants into

⁴⁴ Byrne, "Hugh MacRae's Practical Application of Common Sense in Colonization," *Manufacturer's Record*, 30 May 1912.

⁴⁵ Robert Vincent, "Successfully Immigrants in the South: the Difficult Problem Solved by the Businesslike Efforts of One Man," *The World's Work*, Nov. 1908-Aprl 1909 (New York: Doubleday, 1909), 10910.

colonies, and he had set up a loose infrastructure for cooperation based on progressive ideas of science, benevolent paternalism, and rational, efficient development, but he had not yet formulated a philosophy on how a cooperative community worked. Only after years of experimentation did he come to understand what makes a community successful, and he learned most of it from the immigrants. When discussing his colonies, MacRae often remarked that “we have learned more than we have taught.”⁴⁶ In St. Helena, perhaps the most successful colony, immigrants arrived from farming villages in northern Italy with experience in cooperative farming. With no prompting from MacRae, they formed a cooperative society, which took the shape of a joint stock company, in which each colonist had an equal share. In addition to marketing their produce, the company constructed a cooperative store, a blacksmith shop, and a bakery, and purchased machinery, fertilizer, and seeds. They also held dances, formed musical bands, and developed a civil society of associations and organizations. To all the observers who visited the colony, they appeared happy. MacRae had taught them how to farm the Pender County soil, and they taught him how to operate a successful community.⁴⁷ The key, he came to believe, was cooperation. As Thomas Adams observed of MacRae’s colonies in his report for the Farm Cities Corporation in 1921, “Where there has been co-operation success has been greatest.”⁴⁸

MacRae also learned from his experiments that communities established on a communistic basis did not work. In 1909, a Dutch socialist and admirer of Henry David Thoreau, Dr. Frederik Van Eeden, was excited about MacRae’s success after a visit to his

⁴⁶ MacRae, “Colonization Opportunity in the Southern States,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 27 December 1909.

⁴⁷ Felice Ferrero, “A New St. Helena,” *The Survey, A Journal of Constructive Philanthropy*, Vol. 23 (6 November 1909), 176-178.

⁴⁸ Thomas Adams, “Proposed Farm City in Pender County, North Carolina,” Farm Cities Corporation (Privately published, 1921), 12.

colonies, and he convinced MacRae to start a colony of Dutch farmers based on Van Eeden's social theories. His cooperative theories differed little from those of the colonists at St. Helena, but Van Eeden decided to take it a step further and extend the cooperative principle to the entire colony. There would be no private property. All property would be owned by a corporation in which every colonist had an equal share, and each colonist would receive dividends in proportion to their productivity. He believed such a cooperative system would eliminate poverty and corruption and prevent the development of a wage system. "If you do not form such a group," he told prospective colonists, "society will force you to take part in its unfair dealings."⁴⁹ However, by all accounts, the Van Eeden colony met with, at best, mixed results. By 1912, there were only five families living in Van Eeden, and they limped along until 1939 when a New York Corporation purchased the colony to relocate Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler's persecutions. MacRae told Bjorkman that the colony failed to thrive because Van Eeden selected his immigrants "with an eye to charity rather than efficiency," suggesting that his underlying theory was to blame.⁵⁰ Others have blamed poor soil conditions for its failure.⁵¹ Needless to say, it did not prove to be a successful model, and private property remained a central aspect of MacRae's philosophy.

MacRae learned many other lessons from his experiments, lessons that informed his philosophy in various ways. For example, he found that single men proved undesirable colonists for two reasons: they lacked the labor force (a family) needed to maintain a farm, and they were not as tied to the community. They often vanished at the

⁴⁹ "Van Eeden Colony, North Carolina-U.S.A.," pamphlet in MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

⁵⁰ Bjorkman, "Hugh MacRae, Builder of Human Happiness," 18.

⁵¹ Lewis Leary, "Walden Goes Wandering: the Transit of Good Intentions," *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (March, 1959), 27.

first sign of opportunity elsewhere, convincing MacRae to recruit only families. He also learned from the colony at Artesia, populated by “slum dwellers” from London, that character meant everything in a successful community. These colonists proved much less industrious than the other nationalities, and they “left promptly when they could discover no music hall within convenient reach of their settlement.”⁵² Colonists had to enjoy life in a small rural community, and to do so meant creating their own forms of entertainment, finding satisfaction in farming, and fulfilling their social needs locally. He also discovered that colonies of mixed nationalities actually enhanced productiveness, as each nationality brought unique farming experience to the colony and thus broadened the range of experiments in each colony. Once one group reported successful results, the entire colony adopted the methods of that group.⁵³ He carried these lessons with him in his campaign for Farm City.

By the time he embarked on his campaign for Farm City, MacRae had developed a relatively sophisticated recipe for successful colonization, one that included social, as well as economic, components. It included seven “prime requisites” (as he told Robert Darden in 1924):

1. First class land and climatic conditions
2. Establishment of families in community groups, and the development of cooperative buying and selling organizations, which are only possible when people live in communities.
3. A location having good transportation facilities and access to large markets.
4. Provision for long term credit at moderate rate of interest.
5. Sound agricultural plan which can be operated by a man of average intelligence.
6. Selecting only married men, and preferably families with farm experience and a desire for country life.

⁵² Bjorkman, “Hugh MacRae, Builder of Human Happiness,” 18.

⁵³ While many observers documented this fact, see, for example, Byrne, “Hugh MacRae’s Practical Application of Common Sense in Colonization.”

7. Supervision of the undertakings, with considerable emphasis on social, religious, and recreational features.⁵⁴

The MacRae colonies, as they became known, immediately attracted the attention of much of the region, if not the nation. In a three-page feature in the *Charlotte Observer*, journalist Robert Vincent, who was on the 1908 trip, hailed the experiment as the “turning point which shall eventually lead on to the flood-tide of [North Carolina’s] prosperity.”⁵⁵ George Byrne visited the colonies in 1912 and wrote in the *Manufacturer’s Record* that they were “the most significant enterprise now being carried forward in the South...pointing the way...to an economic revolution.”⁵⁶ Early visitors to the colonies admired the prosperity they observed. Stories abounded of farmers clearing \$4,000 a year and paying off their land within 24 months of their arrival.⁵⁷ They also often remarked that the farmers seemed happy. “They are contented with their lot—there is no doubt about that, and that is half the battle,” Vincent wrote.⁵⁸ Byrne used more elaborate prose: “The joy that gleams in the eyes and glows in the countenances of some of these people as they contemplate and speak of the fact that they are or will soon become landowners is almost fierce in its intensity.”⁵⁹ When an “agricultural expert” visited the colonies (probably in the early 1920s), he purportedly remarked that “I have seen what I had come to believe did not exist... in this part of the country at least. I have seen people at last who are really happy while tilling the soil for a living.”⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Robert Darden, “The Economic and Social Significance of the Hugh MacRae Colonies,” manuscript, North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁵⁵ Vincent, “North Carolina’s First Great Colonization Movement,” *Charlotte Observer*, 26 April 1908.

⁵⁶ Byrne, “Hugh MacRae’s Practical Application of Common Sense in Colonization,” *Manufacturer’s Record*, 30 May 1912.

⁵⁷ “America’s Richest Acre,” *Charlotte Observer*, 18 May 1922.

⁵⁸ Vincent, “North Carolina’s First Great Colonization Movement,” *Charlotte Observer*, 26 April 1908.

⁵⁹ Byrne, “Hugh MacRae’s Practical Application of Common Sense in Colonization,” *Manufacturer’s Record*, 30 May 1912.

⁶⁰ Bjorkman, “Hugh MacRae, Builder of Human Happiness,” MFP, 2.

The popularity of MacRae's colonies can be attributed to their cozy fit within a powerful new southern identity that Paul Gaston has called the New South Creed. Its proponents, as James C. Cobb explained it, "vowed to use industrial development to northernize their region's economy while doing their best to restore and then to uphold the most definitively 'southern' ideals of the Old South, especially its racial, political, and class hierarchies."⁶¹ This enabled southerners to be optimistic about a future that was economically progressive and socially conservative. It was this unique milieu of reform sentiment that generated such enthusiasm for MacRae's colonies. Indeed, they seemed to offer a way to build up the countryside without jeopardizing the South's industrial destiny or its social order. He sold the idea of immigration to his fellow southerners by promising to create a new "white" farming population that would stabilize the countryside, thus enabling a healthy transition of native white farmers to the ranks of industrial labor. "The logical way to increase the South's power of producing wealth," he told a group of North Carolina natives living in New York in 1908, "is to bring in an agricultural population to supply the places of those who will be taken by the industries from the farms."⁶²

For reluctant southerners, the key to successful immigration was recruiting the right kind of immigrants, and visitors to MacRae's colonies were impressed by the degree to which the colonists were being assimilated. "These foreigners have come to be intensely American in spirit," one writer noted.⁶³ That largely meant two things: first, they were driven by the private property motive, and second, they were not a threat to the

⁶¹ James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 68.

⁶² Hugh MacRae, "Address of Hugh MacRae before the North Carolina Society of New York," *News & Observer* (Raleigh), 8 December 1908.

⁶³ Darden, "The Economic and Social Significance of the Hugh MacRae Colonies."

social order. “As soon as they become landed proprietors...,” Byrne observed, “they feel that they are stockholders in the great corporation known as the United States... You do not find—you never will find—anarchists and disturbers of the country’s peace living upon the farms and tilling the soil.”⁶⁴ To these observers, MacRae’s colonies accorded well with the New South Creed and the southern progressive emphasis on social order.

By 1908, MacRae had developed a substantial reputation across the state of North Carolina, a reputation that was bolstered by his dualistic image as both forward- and rear-facing. While some, like U.S. Circuit Court Judge H. G. Connor and businessman Henry Fries, described him as having “safe conservative views,” others saw his leadership as “efficient and progressive.”⁶⁵ To them, he was forward-looking, but he was governed by a constitution that committed him to the Old-South values of agrarianism and white supremacy. Josephus Daniels, the editor of the *Raleigh News & Observer* and future Secretary of the Navy, called MacRae “one of the ablest and most reliable businessmen in the state.” Governor R. B. Glenn remarked that “There is no man in the State of North Carolina who stands any higher than he in either business or social circles.” J.A. Taylor, president of the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, said that MacRae “has done more than any citizen of Wilmington to develop her resources and lay plans for her future and permanent growth.”⁶⁶ Although his solutions were, in hindsight, somewhat radical, MacRae and his vision for the South appealed to southerners who were optimistic, if a bit anxious, about the South’s future and sought solutions that synthesized a new economic message and an old social message.

⁶⁴ Byrne, “Hugh MacRae’s Practical Application of Common Sense in Colonization.”

⁶⁵ These quotations are from a collection of references that MacRae compiled in 1908. see MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

As a supporter of the New South Creed, MacRae was committed to strengthening manufacturing and attracting industry, but he approached the issue of economic development from a broader perspective. In fact, he was never a big fan of manufacturing. In the 1880s, he tried his hand in running one of his late father's cotton mills, but he sold it because "he could not bear watching the grind which seemed inseparable from the mill industry."⁶⁷ Perhaps reflecting his conservationist philosophy and engineering background, he maintained a firm conviction that the region's economy must be balanced and planned. By the first decade of the twentieth century, this conviction pushed him toward the development of a comprehensive plan for Wilmington's growth that would harmonize the interests of many different sectors of the economy. Upon his father's death, MacRae found himself in control of the city's power plant, a gas company, streetcar lines, and several dams on nearby rivers. In 1907, he consolidated his interests into one public service company called the Tidewater Power Company and began implementing his vision for the city. In addition to his suburban farm colonies, he planned a manufacturing suburb and a resort, extended streetcar lines into the suburbs, and expanded electricity and gas service to a larger segment of the city.⁶⁸ In effect, he monopolized the utilities for many neighborhoods. The Tidewater Power Company also organized dances, concerts, and sporting events.⁶⁹

In 1914, MacRae led a group of businessmen in forming Wilmington's Interlocking Interests in an effort to "conserve and direct the viability and mental vigor of

⁶⁷ Bjorkman, 14.

⁶⁸ "Extensive Improvements," *Charlotte Observer*, 28 December 1911.

⁶⁹ For examples of the social events sponsored by the Tidewater Power Company, see "Wilmington Will See Double-Header," *Charlotte Observer*, 3 September 1911; "In North Carolina Social Circles," *Charlotte Observer*, 1 September 1912.

the city with a view to upbuilding Wilmington and the surrounding area.”⁷⁰ In forming this association, MacRae hoped to unite the varied business interests of the city behind a vision—his vision—for the city’s future based on cooperation, balanced development, and corporate paternalism. “Through lack of co-operation we have heretofore failed to develop more than a small fraction of the wealth which should be created,” he told a group of businessmen the following year. “Without a clearly directed purpose the community can drift... The psychology of the community must be right; otherwise stagnation and comparative poverty is certain.”⁷¹ He advocated joint ownership and development of land for new industries and called for the combined effort of “the city, the county, and the citizens and Tidewater Power Company.”⁷² Although he pushed for cooperation, he clearly saw himself as the benevolent paternalist who would guide Wilmington to its industrial destiny, and people generally supported him.⁷³

However, MacRae’s broad perspective and immense inherited fortune enabled him to see beyond the promises of rapid industrialization that consumed many New South proponents. Indeed, as the progressive movement gained steam in the South, his attention became increasingly fixated on finding a way to improve man’s relationship to “the land,” which he referred to interchangeably as “Nature” with a capital “N.” As one of his interviewers noted, he “seems to have begun life land-minded.”⁷⁴ He believed that the South owed a “debt to Nature” and that humans should not try to operate outside of it.

⁷⁰ *Morning Star*, 19 June 1914.

⁷¹ “Meeting of Committee to Consider Details of Plan for Manufacturing Suburb,” MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, NC; “Plans Inaugurated for More Industries,” *Wilmington Morning Star*, 12 January 1916.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ “The Newer Wilmington,” *Charlotte Observer*, 30 June 1914.

⁷⁴ Robert Darden, “The Economic and Social Significance of the Hugh MacRae Colonies,” *Rural Economics*, Sept. 1914, manuscript located in North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Observing that “It is usual to ascribe too much to man’s efficiency and wit and too little to Nature,” he warned that man should not disregard natural laws, describing them as “infinite forces which make their influence felt for all time.”⁷⁵ “These lands have been sucked dry,” he told journalist Edwin Bjorkman. “Everything has been taken out of the soil and nothing has been put back. When you take, you must also give, or starved nature will starve you.”⁷⁶ MacRae may have seen promise in the New South Creed, but his view was ultimately on the land. It was this focus that made him less the intellectual colleague of Henry Grady and Henry Watterson and more of Gifford Pinchot and Frederick Newell.

In the fall of 1914, MacRae found his paternal vision for Wilmington under symbolic attack when his monopoly of Wrightsville Beach’s transportation system was challenged by a new corporation. Tidewater Power Company owned and operated an existing streetcar system on the beach with plans to extend the line further and develop a resort, but the Wilmington and Carolina Railway Company applied to the city for a franchise to build their own street-car system on the beach. The city council approved it and put in on a ballot for the city’s voters to decide, initiating an intense campaign over the right to develop the city’s future.

In the weeks leading up to the vote, the Tidewater Power Company took out daily full-page ads in a multi-pronged attack on the proposed franchise. The author, presumably MacRae, recounted the public service achievements of the company and attacked the financial and moral credibility of the Wilmington and Carolina Beach Railway Company, leading, in one instance, to the arrest of one of the company’s

⁷⁵ MacRae, “The Potential South.”

⁷⁶ Bjorkman, “Hugh MacRae, Builder of Human Happiness,” 6.

executives (the case was promptly dismissed).⁷⁷ He also argued against the franchise on principle: “Competition in public service is against public policy... It is always temporary and results in economic waste.”⁷⁸ Although the franchise challenged only a small corner of Tidewater’s overall operations, MacRae turned the campaign into something more symbolic. To him, it was a referendum on his vision for Wilmington’s future, and his campaign drew statewide attention.⁷⁹ However, in October, voters approved the franchise, and MacRae must have been crushed. His brand of benevolent paternalism had been rejected by the people of Wilmington. Though he would remain active in Wilmington affairs for the next few years, he sold his controlling stake in the Tidewater Power Company in 1922 to focus full-time on creating Farm City.⁸⁰

MacRae’s symbolic defeat was somewhat indicative of a larger philosophical clash between progressive conservationists and the democratic yearnings of an ascending middle class. Deep down, MacRae distrusted unrestrained competition, in farming as well as in municipal services, believing that it led to inefficiency and waste. His solution was a system of benevolent paternalism aimed at making the economy run more efficiently, but this system would only work if it was under his control. Through this system, he hoped to harmonize the interests of the city, as well as the relationship between the city and its countryside, but to many progressives, including the growing middle-class, such control was anathema to democracy. Attempts to monopolize markets, including municipal services, no matter how beneficial it was to the public at

⁷⁷ “Pittsburg Case Against Greenmayer Settled,” *Charlotte Observer*, 7 October 1914.

⁷⁸ *The Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), 30 September 1914.

⁷⁹ “Red Hot Campaign Closes in Wilmington Wednesday,” *Charlotte Observer*, 5 October 1914.

⁸⁰ “Hugh MacRae, Builder,” *Charlotte Observer*, 1 June 1922.

large, were increasingly seen as un-democratic.⁸¹ With the public's rejection of his paternalistic vision, MacRae began to reorient his energies away from the city and toward the country. In the process, his broad New South vision for southeastern North Carolina was replaced by one more narrowly focused on his colonization scheme.

Although the extent to which his reorientation can be attributed to his public rebuke remains unclear, it is evident that in 1914, MacRae was somewhere near the beginning of a philosophical shift that could only have been hastened by his loss of the Wilmington monopoly. Hugh MacRae started his colonization scheme in 1905 as a one part of a broad social and economic development plan that he believed would maintain a healthy balance between the city and its countryside, as well as between the white and black population. However, by the time the United States embarked on its first European war in 1917, he was losing that faith. In the face of worsening economic conditions in the countryside, he and other progressives grew increasingly concerned that southern route to progress had somehow bypassed the farmer. The New South had not lived up to its promise. The message of the burgeoning Country Life Movement, as well as the surprising success of his colonies, enabled him to see his experiments in a new light, one that shone not so much on the immigrants themselves but on the example they set. After World War I and through the twilight of his life, he would spend his time trying to enact

⁸¹ In his study of Wisconsin progressivism, David Thelen argued that progressivism was born of the anti-monopoly impulse generated by the rapid growth of city services. Prior to the twentieth century, the reform sentiment had been brewing among farmers squeezed by railroad trusts, but they could never generate the type of organization or cohesion needed to successfully challenge the implicit Gilded Age support of business monopoly. When those professionals felt the pinch of monopoly due to growing public service corporations like MacRae's, they turned to progressivism and initiated an anti-monopoly social movement. While Wisconsin was certainly different from North Carolina, it is likely that MacRae was facing a similar type of resistance. See David P. Thelen, *The New Citizenship: Origins of Progressivism in Wisconsin, 1885-1900* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1972).

meaningful rural reform, which, to him, meant building planned agricultural communities with which to reorganize southern rural life.

CHAPTER 2

RECONCILING DEMOCRACY AND EFFICIENCY: COUNTRY LIFE CONSERVATIONISM AND THE COLONIZATION IDEA

In 1921, with the incorporation of the Farm Cities Corporation, Hugh MacRae initiated one of the most ambitious social projects in conservation history. His objective was to build a perfect community, but his aim was actually much higher. He sought nothing less than the reorganization of rural life. According to its charter, the corporation was created:

To establish a 'Farm City,' typical of others, where families can cultivate the land profitably and, at the same time, can enjoy the social, intellectual, and economic advantages of community life; and to establish other communities—rural, urban, or suburban—and to develop, foster, and control same in such manner as opportunity, wisdom, and patriotism may suggest.¹

Such a dream was a far cry from his original intentions when he began recruiting immigrants to live in his colonies outside Wilmington. His colonies had been an experiment in farmland reclamation, the byproduct of a New South vision that synthesized economic modernization with a traditional social order. He had hoped that

¹ Charter, Farm Cities Corporation of America, quoted in "Ear to the Ground," *World Agriculture*, Vol. III, No. 1 (January 1923), 231.

they would work to strengthen white supremacy and contribute wealth to the emerging urban-industrial order in southeastern North Carolina, but now, he wanted to revolutionize rural life across the country, and he would spend the next two decades attempting to do so. The shift, it seems, came during World War I.

In 1916, MacRae published his most widely read article entitled “Vitalizing the Nation and Conserving Human Units Through the Development of Agricultural Communities,” in which he moved away from the New South doctrine of economic progress that he had earlier expounded. Rather than promoting immigration as a way to build up wealth for the region, he called for the reclamation of abandoned farmlands as a way to revolutionize rural life. “People who have agricultural inclinations, or training, or ability,” he wrote, “should find it profitable and attractive to live on the land and in rural communities made far better and more modern than they have been in the past.”²

MacRae had always maintained that corporations should be responsible for and responsive to public happiness, but his article offered a more forceful challenge to private capitalists to put the “cultivation of human welfare” above profit. “If extravagance and selfishness are to be the outcome [of economic development] then indeed the future is dark,” he warned, “but if American democracy has reached a point where it can rise above the temptations which accompany wealth, and can use this wealth for the well-being of democracy, then we may truly say that liberty will be enlightening the world.”³ Instead of promoting his colonies as a means to a capitalist economic end, he began promoting colonization almost as an end in itself. “Is the time not now ripe,” he asked,

² Hugh MacRae, “Vitalizing the Nation and Conserving Human Units Through the Development of Agricultural Communities,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 63, National Industries and the Federal Government (Jan. 1916), 284.

³ Ibid.

“for calling together scientists and sociologists for the study and recognition of methods and legislation having for its purpose the betterment of human conditions?”⁴

Why did MacRae’s rhetoric change? What accounts for his emphatic shift away from the goal of “developing wealth for the South” to the more altruistic “betterment of human conditions?” Why did he conceive of the idea of Farm City? To answer these questions, it is necessary to further examine the relationship between agriculture and the conservation movement, as well as the broader ideological shifts within the movement in the years surrounding World War I. Like other conservationists, MacRae had grown increasingly concerned that the countryside was not developing in proportion to the nation’s cities. Believing that such growth was unsustainable and hoping to find a way to stem the rural-to-urban migrations that were depleting the nation’s farms, MacRae and other conservationists were attracted to the effort to revive rural life in the United States. Between 1908 and 1917, as he gradually detached himself from Wilmington’s public utility industry, he immersed himself more firmly into the cause of rural reform. Reaching the height of its influence in the decade prior to World War I, the so-called Country Life Movement was comprised of many different stripes of politicians, academics, journalists, and farmers, who were all seeking answers to the question: “What can be done to arrest the deterioration of the rural forces, man and soil?”⁵ Prior to the war, there existed a vague consensus among Country Lifers that greater efficiency in rural institutions, including agriculture, would lead to more prosperous rural communities, but the war would expose some significant differences within the

⁴ Ibid, 286.

⁵ Clarence Sears Kates, “Origin and Growth of Rural Conferences,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 40, Country Life (Mar., 1912), 110.

movement, particularly between conservationists and agricultural reformers.

Understanding that philosophical rift will illustrate the appeal of the idea of Farm City.

The organized movement to improve rural life in the United States was invigorated in 1908, when President Theodore Roosevelt appointed the Country Life Commission to investigate the conditions in the countryside and “call attention to the opportunities for better business and better living on the farm.”⁶ Roosevelt appointed several prominent conservationists to the Commission, including Pinchot, Liberty Hyde Bailey, a professor at Cornell University’s Agricultural College, Kenyon Butterfield of the Massachusetts Agricultural College, Walter Hines Page, editor of the *World’s Work* magazine, and Henry Wallace, editor of *Wallace’s Farmer* and father of the future Secretary of Agriculture.⁷ They distributed half a million questionnaires to farmers around the country asking them about their challenges and opinions, and they received a wide variety of different answers. The farmers identified problems like land speculation, monopolistic control of streams and forests, soil depletion, intemperance, lack of good roads, ineffective local institutions, and the unfair profits reaped by transportation companies and distributors.⁸ Taking these complaints into account, the Commission offered a number of general suggestions about how to improve rural life. Above all, they concluded, “Country life must be made thoroughly attractive and satisfying...With most persons this can come only with the development of a strong community sense of feeling.”⁹ In order to strengthen the sense of community in the countryside, the

⁶ Country Life Commission, *Report of the Country Life Commission*, 60th Cong., 2d Sess., Senate Document No. 705 (Washington, 1909), 4.

⁷ Wallace would later serve as the president of the National Conservation Congress in 1911, and Bailey, Pinchot, and Page would serve on its executive committee.

⁸ Country Life Commission, *Report of the Country Life Commission*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid*, 48.

Commission called for, among other things, making local institutions more efficient and encouraging local farmers to adopt cooperative business methods. The report, however, was not so much a prescription for rural life as much as it was the opening salvo of a passionate discussion of the “rural life problem” that gradually coalesced into the Country Life Movement.

More accurately, however, the Country Life Movement should be seen as part of the conservation movement, as these reformers were ultimately motivated by the same desire for sustainable national development.¹⁰ To Bailey, the movement’s literary leader, Country Life was about finding a way to stabilize the population on the land. “[A]t the bottom of our present movement,” he wrote in *The Country-Life Movement in the United States*, “is the immanent problem of remaining more or less stationary on our present lands, rather than moving on to untouched lands, when the ready-to-use fertility is reduced.”¹¹ In this, he and other Country Lifers were answering the call of George Perkins Marsh, widely considered the intellectual forefather of American conservation, who lamented in 1863 that “the landscape is as variable as the habits of the population. It is time for some abatement in the restless love of change which characterizes us, and makes us almost a nomadic, rather than sedentary, people.”¹² Without exception, historians have analyzed the two movements separately, but many conservationists saw them as not only related but mutually dependent. Theodore Roosevelt, who called conservation and country life “two sides to the same policy,” believed that “neither of

¹⁰ This argument has been recently made by Scott Peters and Paul Morgan. See Peters and Morgan, “The Country Life Commission: Reconsidering a Milestone in American Agricultural History,” *Agricultural History*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (Summer 2004), 289-316.

¹¹ Liberty Hyde Bailey, *The Country Life Movement in the United States* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1920), 6.

¹² George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature; or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1864), 328.

them can be successfully solved save on condition that there is at least a measurable success in the effort to solve the other.”¹³ In order to understand the popularity of the Farm City idea among conservationists, one must look beyond forest management and western reclamation to see the full vision for the nation. The yeoman farmer played a key role in that vision.

At the base of the Country Life conservationist vision was the small, independent, yeoman farmer. For Frederick Newell, strengthening the yeomanry was the central objective of the western reclamation projects. “[Dams and irrigation projects] in themselves are notable,” Newell wrote in *Conservation of Natural Resources* (1909), “but their importance to the nation comes from the fact that they make possible opportunities for the creation of small farms and building of homes for an independent citizenship.”¹⁴ Pinchot agreed: “Of all forms of conservation,” he wrote in *The Fight for Conservation* (1910), “there is none more important than that of holding the public lands for the actual home-maker.”¹⁵ The small farmer, they believed, was the source of “steadiness and stability” in the national economy.¹⁶ He was also the frontline conservationist who was ultimately responsible for husbanding the nation’s resources. “The farmer is the ultimate conservator of the resources of the earth,” Bailey told the audience at the Second National Conservation Congress. “It is the ultimate problem of the race to devise a permanent self-sustaining organized agriculture on a scientific

¹³ “Better Farm Life is Greatest Need Says Roosevelt,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 24 August 1910.

¹⁴ F. H. Newell, “What May Be Accomplished by Reclamation,” *Conservation of Natural Resources* (American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1909), 660; for more on Newell, see Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 7-26.

¹⁵ Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation*, 12.

¹⁶ See *Ibid*, 21.

basis.”¹⁷ Roosevelt also placed great emphasis on the role of the small farmer in the conservation movement. “The public opinion to which we must look to make Conservation an effective National policy will not come from the cities where big business is in power,” he wrote in an editorial to *Outlook* magazine. “It will come from the farmers.”¹⁸ This was the conservation agrarianism that informed MacRae’s colonization theories around Wilmington and the same ideal that would attract many conservationists to the idea of Farm City.¹⁹

As Samuel Hays has pointed out, efficiency was the watchword of the conservation movement, but in the minds of many Country Life conservationists, efficiency was always a means to this agrarian social end. They believed that farming should become more efficient, that farmers should learn how to organize and use scientific principles to boost productivity, but this belief was always predicated on keeping small farmers on the land. “[T]he ideal of rural betterment is to preserve upon our farms the typical American farmer,” Butterfield wrote in 1905.²⁰ W. J. McGee, whom Gifford Pinchot called the “scientific brains” of the conservation movement,

¹⁷ *Proceedings of the Second National Conservation Congress at Saint Paul, September 5-8, 1910* (Washington: National Conservation Congress, 1911), 213, 210, 211.

¹⁸ Theodore Roosevelt, “The Welfare of the Farmer,” *Outlook*, 20 April 1912.

¹⁹ As part of his onslaught on the democratic presumptions of the conservationists, Samuel Hays has argued that despite the agrarian rhetoric employed by the conservationists, they ultimately cared little for the small farmer. They frequently found themselves on the opposing side of the farmers in debates over resource use, and they seemed to overlook the fact that “small farmers, as well as corporate leaders, helped to establish a wasteful pattern of land use.” In the final analysis, Hays asserts that Roosevelt and the conservationists faced two directions at once, promoting both economic efficiency and Jeffersonian democracy without comprehending the two as “contradictory trends of thought.” To many Country Life conservationists, however, they were not contradictory. Genuinely believing that individual farmers could be turned into community-minded conservationists with a relatively equal stake in the land, they adopted a variety of tactics to strengthen community life, and education became their great crusade. In reality, they struggled for years to find some kind of synthesis that would both preserve democracy and promote efficiency. It was at the height of this struggle that many Country Lifers and conservationists, including MacRae himself, came to see the idea of Farm City as a potential solution to this impasse. See Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 263, 268.

²⁰ Kenyon Butterfield, “The Social Problems of American Farmers,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 10, No. 5 (Mar., 1905), 622.

promoted the idea of “human efficiency” as “a sort of equation expressing the relations between man and earth, measured by the powers of accomplishment, the prospects of perpetuity, and the general welfare of mankind.”²¹ In other words, their idea of efficiency applied to farming went well beyond the belief that farmers should produce more. They held significant social goals as well.²² When they spoke of better organization of farmers, they were not necessarily referring to industrial organization along capitalistic lines. Many of them were referring to democratic cooperation between land-owning yeomen, which was the best way to preserve the farmers’ position on the land. “It looks as if we have come to the time when we must either have corporation farming or co-operative farming,” Clarence Poe, editor of the *Progressive Farmer*, wrote in 1913. “We prefer the latter.”²³ This was the type of efficiency to which MacRae was referring when he hoped that “through such an organized group we could reach, by democratic means, a degree of efficiency and comfort” that would lead to “the good of humanity.”²⁴ When the two movements are analyzed together, it becomes even more clear, as Leonard Bates has argued, that conservation was a democratic movement.

²¹ For Pinchot’s explanation of the origins of the conservation movement, including his discussion of W. J. McGee, see Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground* (Washington, D. C.: Island Press, 1947), 322-323; For McGee’s philosophy of human efficiency, see *Addresses and Proceedings of the Third National Conservation Congress, Held at Kansas City, MO, Sept., 25-27, 1911*, 186.

²² David Danbom asserts that Country Lifers were solely concerned with improving agricultural efficiency, and they promoted social and economic organization as a means of securing that goal. He argues that “most believed that industrialization had proved organization and efficiency to be one in the same.” While this may have been true for some Country Lifers, many of them were still seeking ways to organize farmers so that they could remain on the land. Danbom argues that because Country Lifers cleared the way for the industrialization of agriculture, they, therefore, tacitly supported the changes that came, but there is no way that they could foresee the industrial changes that were to take place in the post-World-War-I years. See Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames: University of Iowa Press, 1979), 44-50.

²³ Clarence Poe, “Corporation Farming or Co-operative Farming?” *Progressive Farmer*, 1 February 1913.

²⁴ MacRae, “Vitalizing the Nation and Conserving Human Units Through the Development of Agricultural Communities,” 286.

Indeed, rather than organized efficiency, keeping people on the land and in touch with nature was the primary concern of many, though not all, Country Life leaders. Linking his agrarian goals to national development, Pinchot believed that “The man on the farm is valuable to the Nation, like any other citizen, just in proportion to his intelligence, character, ability, and patriotism; but unlike other citizens, also in proportion to his attachment to the soil.”²⁵ Liberty H. Bailey feared the environmental consequences of uprooting Americans from the land. In one of the most eloquent and romantic defenses of conservation agrarianism, Bailey wrote in *The Holy Earth* (1915) that Americans needed a “clearer sense of relationship with the earth.” He warned that “the population of the earth is increasing, the relative population of farmers is decreasing, people are herding into cities, we have a city mind, and relatively fewer people are brought into touch with the earth in any real way.” He hoped that as a result of the new conservation mindset, “all the people, or as many of them as possible, shall have contact with the earth and that the earth righteousness shall be abundantly taught.”²⁶ To that end, Bailey led a campaign to promote the teaching of nature studies in rural schools. Harkening back to Henry David Thoreau and anticipating Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, as well as the agrarian environmental writings of Wendell Berry, Bailey believed that farming provided a spiritual contact with nature that was jeopardized by the prevailing trends of urbanization and capitalist farming. “[F]arming itself is changing radically in character,” he wrote. “It ceases to be an occupation to gain sustenance and becomes a business... We must be alert to see that it does not lose its capacity for spiritual contact.”²⁷ Though it is unclear if MacRae attached the same spiritual values to farming, he certainly

²⁵ Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation*, 22.

²⁶ Liberty Hyde Bailey, *The Holy Earth* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916), 23-25.

²⁷ Ibid.

thought farming was healthier mentally and physically. “Factory life depletes the worker while farm life recreates him,” he said.²⁸ MacRae was critical of the “complex, often deformed, mass-life” of modern America and thought farming was a good antidote, the basis for “man conservation.”²⁹

As indicated by the concern for “man conservation,” the yeoman farmer at the center of the Country Life vision was male. It was the preservation of “his” health, independence, and connection to the land that most concerned these rural reformers. It was “he” who was the frontline conservationist, the husbandman of the nation’s resources. However, Country Lifers did not ignore women. On the contrary, many of them glorified the role of the farmer’s wife and maintained that the key to keeping men on the land was reforming the woman’s role as housewife. “Farming is a co-partnership business...between a man and a woman,” Bailey wrote. “On the women depend to a greater degree than we realize the nature and extent of the movement for a better country life.”³⁰ Far from romanticizing the reality of women’s life on the farm, Country Lifers blamed rural isolation for harboring the evils of housewife “drudgery” and believed that women were trapped with few social outlets or technological help. They hoped that by making the home, as well as the farm, more efficient through home demonstration and the better use of technology, the farmer’s wife would have more free time to “broaden her horizon” through more meaningful interaction with the surrounding community, as well as greater interaction with her surrounding natural environment.³¹ Keeping the farmer’s wife happy would ultimately help keep the farmer on the land.

²⁸ “The MacRae Colonies in North Carolina,” *World Agriculture*, Vol. I, No. 4 (Jan., 1921), 79.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ L. H. Bailey, *The Country Life Movement in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1911), 85-90.

³¹ Ibid.

In fact, many Country Lifers argued that women were instrumental in facilitating greater community cooperation and organization. Sir Horace Plunkett, an Irish reformer who first convinced Theodore Roosevelt of the need for a Country Life program, claimed that “the interests and the duties of society, properly so-called—that is, the state of living on friendly terms with our neighbours—are always more central and important in the life of a woman than of a man.”³² Some went so far as to call for “a re-adjustment of home relationships.” Georgia White, Dean of the Michigan Agricultural College, asserted that “the man too often dominates the home. Other members of the family must have an opportunity to develop their own ideals independent of the man.”³³ A cooperative community would give them that chance. Just as Country Lifers worked to readjust the traditional rugged individualism of the American (male) farmer to the demands of the industrial age, they also prescribed a similar adjustment to women’s roles, but these adjustments were inversely related. In order to realize the Country Life ideal, men would have to give up some of their individual autonomy while women would have to exercise greater independence from their husbands by becoming more involved in the community. In the cooperative community, the cherished independence of the male farmer would be tempered by the social needs of the farmer’s wife. Through these adjustments, the traditional roles of husband and wife could be preserved, and farmers could remain on the land.

By the time the United States entered World War I, the Country Life phase of the conservation movement had attracted significant attention across the region. MacRae noted that “daily papers and magazines are devoting more space to subjects of country

³² Horace Plunkett, *The Rural Life Problem in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1919), 140-141.

³³

life and to agriculture, and are continually finding more widespread interest in these subjects.”³⁴ Clarence Poe claimed that “there never was a time when so great an interest was taken in agriculture by the masses of the people as now.”³⁵ As the Country Life Movement gained steam in the South, Hugh MacRae came to identify with this approach to agricultural reform. Since the inception of his colonization experiments, MacRae had become more acutely aware of the problems facing the region’s farmers, and he saw colonization as a possible solution to the nation’s rural ills. He was not so much interested in improving agricultural profitability as he was reforming the lives of those who tilled the soil for a living. Like other Country Lifers, MacRae believed that reform should focus on organizing communities of farmers so that rural life could be made more attractive. If his colonists had taught him anything, it was that without a healthy community life and effective cooperation, “existence on a farm cannot be made successful and happy.”³⁶

The Country Life Movement faced special challenges in the Southern states where the growing tenant system seemed to threaten the entire countryside. In 1909, the Country Life Commission found that southern farmers overwhelmingly blamed soil depletion for the lack of progress in rural development. Calling the situation “desperate” in the South, the Commission linked the social problems of the region to the exhaustive methods of single-crop agriculture practiced on the region’s tenant farms. “The social condition of any agricultural community is closely related to the available fertility of the

³⁴ MacRae, “Vitalizing the Nation and Conserving Human Units Through the Development of Agricultural Communities,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 63, National Industries and the Federal Government (Jan. 1916), 284.

³⁵ “The Greatest Agricultural Development in History,” *Progressive Farmer*, 22 January 1910. For more on the Country Life Movement in the South, see Jack Temple Kirby, *Darkness at the Dawn* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Co., 1972), 131-140. Kirby’s is a brief treatment of the movement in the South. Indeed, a more in-depth look is needed.

³⁶ Bjorkman, 28.

soil,” the report noted. In the South, “the social results are pathetic.”³⁷ Soil depletion had become an “acute national danger, and the economic, social, and political problems arising out of it must at once receive the best attention of the statesmen.”³⁸ The report blamed soil depletion on tenant farming, characterizing it as “exploitational, consisting of mining the virgin fertility.”³⁹ Once tenants skimmed off the topsoil, they did not often build the soil back up, leading to impoverished soils and impoverished communities. The Commission called for state and federal institutions, particularly the Department of Agriculture, to continue their educational efforts in scientific agriculture and increased use of demonstration work, which had proven effective over the previous four years in inducing conservative southern farmers to adopt better farming techniques.⁴⁰

Some southern Country Life conservationists agreed with the Commission’s report and continued to attack tenancy and the single-crop system as the root of all evils—economic, social and environmental—in the southern countryside. In 1913, E.C. Branson called the proliferation of tenancy “the serfdom of a section” and warned that “Land ownership by the few and land orphanage for the many is a perilous economic and social condition upon which to found a wholesome civilization.”⁴¹ Branson and other southern Country Lifers were also motivated by racial fears, as they were concerned that the countryside was being depleted of its white farmers. “It is a fact that Negroes are

³⁷ Country Life Commission, *Report of the Country Life Commission*, 39.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 40, 41.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁰ For more on Seaman A. Knapp and farm demonstration in the South, see Dewey Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 265-268, 320-38; See also Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: the Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Daniel places great emphasis on natural disasters, including the boll weevil, floods, and drought, as the cause of the South’s agricultural problems.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

resisting the lure of city life and sticking to the farm better than whites,” Branson wrote.⁴²

“The white tenant farmers of the South appear to be losing the fierce land lust of their Anglo-Saxon forbears.”⁴³ The anxiety produced by the prospect of an all-black countryside animated the Country Life effort in the South. When they spoke of balancing the rural and urban populations, they were primarily referring to the white population.

Most southerners could agree that agriculture needed to adjust to the demands of the new economy, but they tended to disagree over proposed remedies. Although the nature and extent of their disagreement would not become evident until World War I, there was nevertheless a discernable difference between the agricultural reformers who favored economic solutions to the farm problem and the conservationists who favored social solutions. At the Southern Commercial Congress in 1911, this rift was noticeable. Most of the speakers, such as E. J. Watson, Victor Olmsted, and James Wilson, were primarily concerned with making agriculture more prosperous through the use of scientific methods and better access to markets, but some promoted the idea of the farmer-as-conservationist and argued for the preservation of the yeomanry. While they did not reject the approach of the agricultural reformers, Country Life conservationists like Henry Exall were more interested in maintaining a viable farm population that could effectively husband the region’s resources. “This great Nation has grown rapidly rich, recklessly extravagant and woefully wasteful,” Henry Exall, president of the Texas Industrial Congress, told the Congress. “We are destroying the land as we did the

⁴² E. C. Branson, “Rural Life in the South,” *Publications of the American Statistical Association*, Vol. 13, No. 97 (Mar., 1912), 73.

⁴³ *Proceedings of the Sixteenth Conference for Education in the South, Richmond, VA, Apr., 15-18, 1913*, (Washington, 1913), 135.

buffalo—for the robe.”⁴⁴ Exall praised the small farmers of Europe who “cultivate with the greatest care, save every ounce of fertilizing matter, stop waste by erosion as far as it is possible to do so, and allow no noxious weeds to take from the earth any nourishment that should go into the growing crop.”⁴⁵ Believing that soil conservation could best be accomplished through the preservation of the yeomanry, this group tended to emphasize the social side of the reform effort. “On the great areas of the South now devoted to agriculture, the homes of the farmers are too scattered and there is too little community of interests, too little sociability, too little interchange of thought—we are not farmers, but planters,” Louisiana Congressman Joseph Ransdell told the Congress. “We do not cultivate the soil intensively, hence our profits are small and life in the country is deprived of many of the comforts enjoyed by people in cities.”⁴⁶ The rift between economic reformers and social reformers would be aggravated by World War I.

While all progressives believed that farmers needed to be better organized, MacRae and other Country Lifers saw the community—not the corporation—as the effective unit of organization. “The greatest discovery in the agricultural world in these last ten years,” Clarence Poe wrote in 1913, “is that progress is not an individual matter but a community matter.”⁴⁷ Cooperation between land-owning farmers—and by “farmers,” they meant white farmers—would secure the benefits of organization while keeping the maximum number of farmers on the land. “Cooperation is, indeed, the master word of the new century,” Poe told readers of his influential book *How Farmers*

⁴⁴ *Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the Southern Commercial Congress, Atlanta, GA., March 1911* (Washington, 1911), 429.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 429-430.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 818.

⁴⁷ “The Biggest Thing You Can Do,” *Progressive Farmer*, 4 January 1913.

Co-operate and Double Profits, “and in your neighborhood and all other neighborhoods all the farmers must learn to work together.”⁴⁸

Community organizing also appealed to southerners because it provided a passive and somewhat unassuming route to securing racial segregation. Perhaps the most forceful advocate of rural segregation, Poe saw the racial divide as an impediment to community cooperation and urged southerners to develop racially homogeneous communities. Schools, churches, and cooperatives would all function better, he maintained, if they were all-white. “We simply cannot adequately develop rural co-operation or rural community life where a population, sparse at best, is divided between two races who are utterly separate socially.”⁴⁹ Poe also urged blacks to “buy land apart from those communities where white people wish to develop a robust community life.”⁵⁰ Although MacRae largely dropped his racial rhetoric as he became more influenced by the Country Life Movement, he undoubtedly subscribed to the same theory. As James C. Cobb has noted, by the 1920s, the Jim Crow system had become so entrenched that many southern reformers like MacRae no longer had to devise ways to maintain white supremacy. According to Cobb, “The New South crusade moved quickly from a dualistic attempt to promote economic development while preserving social and political stability to one where preserving social and political stability actually became part of the development effort.”⁵¹ Although they did not explicitly state their racist intentions, many white southerners saw rural community organization as a way to marginalize blacks.

⁴⁸ Clarence Poe, *How Farmers Co-operate and Double Profits: First-Hand Reports on All the Leading Forms of Rural Co-operation in the United States and Europe—Stories That Show How Farmers Can Co-operate by Showing How They Have Done It and Are Doing It* (New York: Orange Judd Co., 1915), 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ See James C. Cobb, “Beyond Planters and Industrialists: a New Perspective on the New South,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Feb., 1988), 66.

However, as MacRae's colonies grew and became more prosperous, it was clear that maintaining such racial segregation was not as easy as some theorists believed. The prospect of cheap labor was too much for many colonists to overlook. While black people could not own a lot in MacRae's colonies or participate in the decision-making process, there were hundreds of black laborers who lived in surrounding communities and worked in the colonies. Indeed, black farm labor would come to bolster the economy of his communities. "These people at Castle Haynes find the negro a great asset," he later told a Senate committee.⁵² The rural democracy that MacRae and other Country Lifers envisioned was, in reality, what Pierre Van den Burghe and others have called "herrenvolk democracy," a democracy for whites only.

By the outbreak of World War I, other southerners had begun to see the benefits of land reclamation in achieving many of the goals of the Country Life movement. In his address before the Southern Commercial Congress, Joseph Ransdell drew attention to "the undrained empire of the South" and advocated the same kind of reclamation effort that was being undertaken in the West. In his empire, white farmers would farm intensively on small tracts of land arranged in such a way that would provide the farmer with the "comforts which come from people massed in communities of considerable size."⁵³ He called for "a plan of procedure based on the experience of the past."⁵⁴ MacRae believed he had found such a plan. Indeed, he and other proponents of southern reclamation came to see the colonization of reclaimed lands as an effective way to

⁵² U.S. Senate, Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation, *Creation of Organized Rural Communities to Demonstrate the Benefits of Planned Settlement, Hearings on S. 412, May 14-15, 1929* 71st Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington, GPO, 1929), 36.

⁵³ *Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the Southern Commercial Congress, Atlanta, GA., March 1911* (Washington, 1911), 819.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 819.

demonstrate the benefits of co-operative communities to farmers in the South and across the Nation. Invoking the idea of “man conservation,” he wrote that the “proper development of agriculture and the right use of the vast potential resources which we have in our unoccupied lands would afford a solution for our present waste of human life and opportunity [and] would relieve the constant poverty and distress of our wornout [human] units.”⁵⁵ They believed colonization of reclaimed lands could be part of an effective rural life program because it could provide a chance to demonstrate the benefits of planned, orderly communities. “Oft repeated demonstration is the only method by which our conservative rural population can be taught,” remarked David R. Coker, a successful farmer and friend of MacRae’s, in the *Manufacturer’s Record*, “and even with such repeated demonstrations the change will be slow until and unless some outside aid is provided the help effect the necessary changes.”⁵⁶ As MacRae had demonstrated at his colonies, a change of environment would show these farmers that social and economic cooperation is possible with the right planning. Colonies on reclaimed lands modeled after his experiments, he hoped, could be the solution to the country life problem.

If they had not already arrived at the same conclusion by the time MacRae published his essay in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, conservationists across the country would soon come to agree with him that planned, organized group settlement was the best way to settle reclaimed lands. By the outbreak of World War I, conservationists were beginning to learn from their earlier efforts at land redistribution, and they would soon find that the individual allotment

⁵⁵ MacRae, “Vitalizing the Nation and Conserving Human Units Through the Development of Agricultural Communities,” 283.

⁵⁶ David R. Coker, “Defense of the Plan for Establishment of Federally-Financed Farm Colonies in South,” *Manufacturer’s Record*, 20 March 1930.

philosophy at the heart of land settlement policy since the Homestead Act of 1862 was inadequate for preserving the yeomanry. Their initial goal of transferring public lands into the hands of small landowners had proven extremely difficult to implement. Individual settlers who remained on the western reclamation projects were not enjoying the good life they sought when they signed up for relocation, and as nearby capitalist farmers increased their market share through expansion and the use of hired hands, they began to feel trapped on submarginal lands, their ambitions repressed by autocratic managers who demanded that they remain smallholders. In 1914, in this atmosphere of discontent, Frederick Newell was dismissed as Director of the U.S. Reclamation Service.⁵⁷

Newell acknowledged that significant lessons had been learned from the projects' failures, and he began to realize that directed and planned community settlement was the best way to secure a democratic countryside. Newell largely blamed the settlers for the projects' failures. He decried the speculative tendencies of farmers and their unwillingness to invest more time in the projects. He cited extreme individualism and the lack of a "community conscience" among the settlers, believing that the tendency of farmers to increase individual landholdings at the expense of their neighbors was "crippling the entire community."⁵⁸ In 1909, while he was still director of the U.S. Reclamation Service, Newell visited Hugh MacRae's colonies and remarked that

⁵⁷ For a good discussion on Newell's trials and his firing, see Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 174-177.

⁵⁸ Frederick Haynes Newell, *Irrigation Management: the Operation, Maintenance, and Betterment of Works for Bringing Water to Agricultural Lands* (New York: Appleton and Co., 1916), 287-288, 294; see also Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 174-180; and Joseph Petulla, *American Environmental History: The Exploitation and Conservation of Natural Resources* (San Francisco: Boyd and Fraser, 1977), 268-271.

MacRae had “solved some of the difficulties of the problem” of reclamation.⁵⁹ “You have apparently demonstrated,” he told the Wilmington businessman, “that...it is practicable to increase enormously the carrying capacity of our agricultural lands” through the “introduction of better farming, better means of communication and improved social conditions.”⁶⁰

Elwood Mead, one of the nation’s foremost irrigation experts by World War I and Newell’s eventual successor as head of federal reclamation, agreed with Newell’s conclusion, but he took it a step further toward practical implementation. He became convinced during his work with Australia’s reclamation projects that group settlement was the key to establishing a happy yeomanry on reclaimed land. Mead shared Newell’s (and other Country Lifers’) belief that a community conscience among settlers was essential, but, like MacRae, he believed that settlement must be planned and organized beforehand in such a way that directly promoted it. “There has never been any attempt on the part of the government to plan in advance the development of any particular area so as to create an agriculture that would maintain or increase the fertility of the soil, that would regard the farm as not solely as place to make money, but the means of a healthy, independent existence and the center of family life.”⁶¹ To that end, he convinced the California state legislature in 1917 to pass a land settlement bill, the first of its kind in American history, that granted him the authority to create planned colonies of small farmers with government financing, and by the end of the war, two colonies—Durham

⁵⁹ Frederick H. Newell to Hugh MacRae, 15 June 1909, in pamphlet, “How to Own a Truck Farm in the Eastern North Carolina Colonies,” MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Elwood Mead, “Placing Soldiers on Farm Colonies,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 81, A Reconstruction Labor Policy (Jan., 1919), 62.

and Delhi—had been established. Much like MacRae had done a decade earlier with his own funds, Mead surveyed the land, prepared farmlands, and completed irrigation works, before the colonists actually arrived. He constructed community centers, recreation facilities, and cooperative factories, provided homes with electricity, and did as much as he could to ensure that farmers would be happy and community-oriented. To ensure that the lands were not passed over to speculators, he included restrictions in the deeds that required the landowner to live on the farm at least eight months out of the year, and land sales had to be approved by a board of colonists.⁶² Mead's colonies attracted widespread attention throughout their existence, although their ultimate success or failure remains a matter of dispute.⁶³ By 1917, a few conservationists promoted colonization as a way to settle public lands, but the experience of World War I convinced more of them that colonization could also be used to revolutionize rural life.

World War I brought significant changes to rural life in the United States. Swings in commodity markets sent shockwaves through the countryside and poor crop production in 1916 and 1917 raised the specter of food shortages. President Woodrow Wilson announced that the government would assume direct control over agricultural production and appointed Herbert Hoover head of the Food Administration. Hoover set price controls on commodities, began a campaign for food conservation, and outlined a program to eliminate waste and speculation and streamline the nation's agricultural sector.⁶⁴ According to James Shideler, the war "was a powerful impetus toward

⁶² Paul Conkin, "The Vision of Elwood Mead," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Apr., 1960), 88-97.

⁶³ Conkin saw Mead's colonies as largely successful, but they could not endure the postwar farm crisis. Donald Worster, however, blames Mead for being despotic, heavy-handed, and unresponsive to the settlers' needs. See *Ibid*; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 180-190.

⁶⁴ For a discussion on the role of the Food Administration during World War I, see James Shideler, *The Farm Crisis, 1919-1923* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1957), 13-19.

uniformity that did much to break down [farmers'] resistance to economic modernization.”⁶⁵ As production, sales, prices, and farm machinery were standardized to supply the wartime demand, farmers began to feel the benefits of enhanced agricultural efficiency.

In addition to economic efficiency, the federal government took a direct role in unifying rural and urban communities for the war effort. Worried about loyalty and recognizing that communities could not be mobilized effectively at arms length, the Council of National Defense created Community Councils in an effort to “bring the people together and provide both effective distribution of the messages of the federal and state governments, and effective organized response to these messages.”⁶⁶ These councils, which supposedly extended into every school district in the nation, worked to unify community institutions and agencies under the common goal of defeating the Central Powers. While the community councils focused on war-related efficiency, the War Camp Community Service sought to strengthen a community identity by promoting “popular activities and relationships which enrich and strengthen community life.”⁶⁷ Operating in over 600 towns and cities across the nation with the goal of providing for the social welfare of soldiers and sailors, the Service oversaw construction of playgrounds and athletic fields, beach areas, and boat ramps, and it planned social activities like dances, movies, picnics, and spelling bees.⁶⁸ President Wilson believed the community programs would “[weld] the nation together as no nation of great size has

⁶⁵ Shideler, *Farm Crisis, 1919-1923*, 13-14.

⁶⁶ Elliot Dunlap Smith, “Community Councils: Their Present Work, Their Future Opportunity,” Speech in the *Proceedings of the First National Country Life Conference, Baltimore, 1919* (Geneva, NY: National Country Life Association, 1919), 37.

⁶⁷ Quote by Pennsylvania Governor William Sproul, head of the War Camp Community Service, in “Community Service,” *Outlook* 16 July 1919.

⁶⁸ Ibid. See also J. M. Mullan, “Community Cooperation,” *Reformed Church Review*, October 1919.

ever been welded before.”⁶⁹ Certainly it seemed to many Country Life conservationists that their vision for rural life was becoming a reality.

In many ways, World War I fulfilled the Country Life conservationists’ dream of enhancing agricultural efficiency and improving community cohesion. The national unity brought by the war stimulated the economy in ways the nation had never seen. The government had succeeded in strengthening the ties between American agriculture and the growing urban-industrial order, raising hopes for the future of country life. “We have risen to unaccustomed heights in self-denial and service, and thereby we have achieved the impossible!” One Country Lifer proclaimed.⁷⁰ Gifford Pinchot believed that “we have passed already into a new world order which has laid the foundations of a new point of view...and that view, if a conservationist must say so...is the point of view of the conservation policy. It is the point of view of planned and orderly development to reach distant ends.”⁷¹

However, at least some were a little uneasy about the effects it might have on rural life. Pinchot wrote, “We have reached a situation in which the indispensable basis of national survival is a higher degree of national efficiency than we have yet sought and a more conscious pursuit of distant aims than has ever been characteristic of the American people.”⁷² He had good reason to be wary. While the agricultural sector became more efficient and boosted production to unprecedented levels during the war, the changes were not always along the lines advocated by Country Life conservationists.

⁶⁹ “President Wilson for Community Councils,” *Anaconda Standard*, 15 March 1918.

⁷⁰ Eugene Davenport, “Wanted: a National Policy in Agriculture,” address in *Proceedings of the First National Country Life Conference, Baltimore, 1919* (Geneva, NY: National Country Life Association, 1919), 184.

⁷¹ Gifford Pinchot, “An Agricultural Policy for the United States in War Time,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 74, *The World’s Food* (Nov. 1917), 181-187.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Intensive farming was not widely adopted, and farm ownership was not a priority. Instead, croplands expanded to artificially high levels, creating a real estate and commodity bubble, and the use of heavy farm machinery and hired labor increased.⁷³ Moreover, some 2.5 million Americans had left the countryside during the war. Some of them went to Europe to fight while others entered the urban war industries.⁷⁴

When the war ended, the bubble burst, and the future of American rural life quickly turned bleak. Wartime prices plummeted as price controls were relaxed. The crop markets dried up, and the labor supply dwindled in the face of a rapid urban migration. Farm wages temporarily spiked due to the labor shortage (although they remained less than half of what a manufacturing worker made in a year⁷⁵), making it increasingly difficult for farmers unable to inject capital into their operations to maintain ownership of their farms. In 1921, farmers bought two and a half times as many tractors as they did in 1919, and across the nation, but especially in the South, tenancy increased to startling dimensions.⁷⁶ Needless to say, these developments were not what Country Life conservationists were hoping for.

The influence of World War I on the conservation movement and the Country Life Movement has received very little scholarly attention. Progressive era scholars have largely clung to the conviction that both movements petered out after the war and have, therefore, offered little further analysis. To be certain, the Country Life/conservationist

⁷³ Lee Alston, "Foreclosures in the United States During the Interwar Period," *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Dec. 1983), 885-903; for the impact of World War I on labor, see Harry Schwartz, "Farm Labor Adjustments after World War I," *Journal of Farm Economics*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Feb., 1943), 269-277.

⁷⁴ Schwartz, "Farm Labor Adjustments After World War I," 269.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Shideler, *The Farm Crisis, 1919-1923*, 1-3, 46-75; for more on the decline of the southern farmer, see Daniel, *Breaking the Land*. Daniel argues that government intrusion in the form of agricultural extension programs, natural disasters, and mechanization brought about the decline of the small farmer, although this happened at a more rapid rate during the 1930s.

coalition dissolved as a result of the war, as streams of reform thought took different directions. However, the campaign to build Farm City suggests that an element of that coalition survived the war, and it can shed important light on their intellectual evolution. After the war, the twin philosophical seams of Country Life and conservation were fused together in the cause of land reclamation. To the proponents of the Farm City idea, creating new co-operative communities on previously unused lands provided perhaps the last best way not only to settle vacant land but also to achieve the social goals of the pre-war movements. In other words, reforming rural life and preserving the yeomanry, now more than ever, required new land settlement.

Perhaps the most illustrative episode of the postwar direction of the conservation movement was the consideration of a bill proposed by Interior Secretary Franklin K. Lane to settle World War I veterans on reclaimed lands in the West and South. Rather than give them individual plots of land as had been done for veterans in previous wars, Lane proposed to organize settlement along the lines established by Elwood Mead and Hugh MacRae.⁷⁷ “There is no use,” he told Congress, “in putting such men on a farm, on a piece of prairie land, on a piece of land out in the mountains of California, or the plains of Wyoming, or down in southern Colorado, and saying, ‘Here is 160 or 320 acres of land; go to it and make a living.’”⁷⁸ While Mead played a central part as a consultant in drafting the bills, officials with the Interior Department also sought out the advice of MacRae, whose colonies Lane called a “very great success.”⁷⁹ Lane proposed colonizing

⁷⁷ Lane was very much impressed by Hugh MacRae’s accomplishments in colonization. He called it a “very great success” and indicated that he had visited the colonies; see House Committee on Appropriations in Charge of Sundry Civil Appropriation Bill for 1920 Relating to the Department of the Interior, *Appropriations Bill for the Reclamation of Swamplands: Hearings on HR 13651*, 65th Cong., 3d sess., January 17, 1919, 9.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 9.

soldiers on public lands in settlements laid out by engineers in a way that encouraged community life. Each community would include more than a hundred soldiers and their families on farms of two to five acres. They would learn intensive farming techniques, more efficient business practices, and how to form buying and selling cooperatives from experts. Moreover, settlers would be encouraged to develop a healthy community life. Lane believed “they should be brought together into the central place and live, in a way, a common life; that is, have a communal sense, a sense of interdependence, a sense that the interest of one was the interest of all, and help each other, and by helping each other help themselves.”⁸⁰ Echoing the sentiments of MacRae, Pinchot, Newell, and other early conservationists, Lane believed that public lands should be used to reestablish the yeomanry, and he saw in the soldier settlement bill an opportunity to build on the lessons learned in earlier reclamation projects.

Conservationists believed the bills would do more than simply settle vacant lands. Indeed, they saw the bills as a way to demonstrate the possibilities of land settlement in all regions, which would fulfill their vision of a countryside populated with healthy, progressive, home-owning stewards of the land. “The community settlement idea is at the bottom of this legislation,” the bill’s sponsor, Wyoming Congressman Frank Mondell, told Congress.⁸¹ Reflecting the far-reaching aims of the bill’s supporters, Reclamation Service engineer H. T. Cory believed that “Such colonies would really constitute centers of infection or inoculation and would do more to standardize the business of farming in a

⁸⁰ Ibid, 7.

⁸¹ House Committee on Public Lands, *Homes for Soldiers, or the National Soldier Settlement Act: Hearings on H.R. 487*, 66th Cong., 1st sess., May 27-May31, 1919, 7.

decade than has so far taken place in the entire history of the country.”⁸² Some Country Lifers shared in the enthusiasm. “There is no other one thing that could be proposed that would do so much to revive agriculture and state prosperity along progressive lines, especially in the Eastern and Southern states,” declared Albert Shaw, the prominent editor and advisor to *Farm City*.⁸³ Lane’s proposal was one of the most ambitious attempts by the federal government to make colonization a part of public policy, but despite favorable responses by many states and organizations and the full support of President Wilson, the bills were ultimately defeated.⁸⁴ The government provided no new colonies for returned soldiers, although they did place several soldiers in existing colonies, including Mead’s and MacRae’s.⁸⁵

As it happened, Lane’s proposal faced stiff opposition from farm groups, including the farm bureaus, who complained that such a plan was “unbusinesslike” and “impractical.” Moreover, they did not like the idea of competing against government-supported farmers.⁸⁶ “It’s a snare and a delusion,” one Illinois farmer remarked. “By all means, let the government do its utmost to help him in every way possible. But as to the proposed wholesale settlement of returned soldiers on reclaimed farms...it means heartache and loss and distress...for everyone.”⁸⁷ A divisive issue in itself, the debate

⁸² H. T. Cory, “Observations of the South’s Opportunities and Adaptability,” *Manufacturer’s Record*, February 1919, 56.

⁸³ Albert Shaw, ed., “Progress of the World,” *The American Review of Reviews*, Vol. LVIX, No. 2 (Feb., 1919), 123.

⁸⁴ For more on the soldier settlement bills, see Bill G. Reid, “Franklin K. Lane’s Idea for Veterans’ Colonization, 1918-1921,” *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Nov., 1964), 447-461.

⁸⁵ See Hugh MacRae to Ida Tarbell, 26 May 1926, Ida Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Pelletier Library, Allegheny College.

⁸⁶ House Committee on Public Lands, *Homes for Soldiers, or the National Soldier Settlement Act: Hearings on H.R. 487*, 66th Cong., 1st sess., May 27-May31, 1919, 618-634; see also Bill Reid, “Agrarian Opposition to Franklin K. Lane’s Proposal for Soldier Settlement, 1918-1921,” *Agricultural History*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Apr., 1967), 167-180.

⁸⁷ T. C. Hart, “South May Be Favored in Soldier Settlement,” *Hoard’s Dairyman*, 1 August 1919, Vol. 58, No. 44.

over Lane's colonization bills also revealed the fault lines within the Country Life Movement opened up by the war. On one side were the conservationists who favored social reform as a means of keeping Americans on the land. On the other were the agricultural reformers who believed that increased agricultural profitability would solve the social problems in the countryside.

The idea of colonization appealed to many conservationists who sought ways to use vacant lands for achieving social reform, and after the war, it became an increasingly central component of conservation ideology. Believing that "what the farmer most needs is not a subsidy but a new adjustment to the land," they saw colonization as a way to develop a new relationship between land and labor.⁸⁸ In his investigation of employment possibilities for returned soldiers for the U.S. Department of Labor in 1919, forester and conservationist Benton MacKaye called for, among other things, a colonization plan similar to Lane's. "[T]he reclamation act of 1902...[did not] do as much as was generally expected to improve the pioneer's condition...because the process was not carried far enough," he concluded. With an intelligent colonization plan, "not only is each farm prepared for use through initial cultivation of the soil and the erection of farm buildings but the community itself is organized for cooperative action in marketing produce, purchasing supplies, obtaining credit, and in providing for social as well as economic needs."⁸⁹ MacKaye would later develop the idea of an "Appalachian Trail" as

⁸⁸ Elwood Mead, "Pygmies in the Earth: a Plea for Rural Reconstruction in the South," *Forum*, May 1928.

⁸⁹ Benton MacKaye, *Employment and Natural Resources: Possibilities of Making New Opportunities for Employment Through the Settlement and Development of Agricultural and Forest Lands and other Resources* (Washington: GPO, 1919), 18; see also Roy Lubove, *Community Planning in the 1920s: the Contribution of the Regional Planning Association of America* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1963), 91-97.

a way to link colonies of agricultural and industrial workers together.⁹⁰ Journalist William Smythe, who served in the Interior Department under Lane, was convinced that Lane's ideals, "certain to prevail in time, will enrich the lives of future generations."⁹¹

For MacKaye and other conservationists, colonization was one part of a broader strategy for regional planning that they hoped would lead to more wise and sustainable use of natural resources. In 1923, he teamed up with Lewis Mumford, Clarence Stein, Thomas Adams, and others in forming the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA). Initially focused on solving the housing crisis that followed World War I, the group of mostly architects and city planners was instrumental in bringing the need for better regional planning into public consciousness. The RPAA has long been associated with garden city movement, pioneered by Ebenezer Howard in England as a means to secure efficient decentralization of industry and a more balanced economic development. Less well documented, however, was the effort, albeit a relatively weak one, to build a movement for farm cities in the United States. In 1920, garden city planner John Nolen believed the time was ripe to extend the development of the garden city idea into the country. "The country has just as great a need and just as good a right to be planned as the city," he wrote in *The American Architect*.⁹² The following year, Smythe noted that "the term Farm City is a term now coming into use to describe a new form of rural life in which much emphasis is given to the social side. As the people of the garden city will depend for cash income chiefly, if not wholly..., so the people of the Farm City will

⁹⁰ For an excellent discussion on Benton MacKaye's social goals and the Appalachian Trail, see Paul Sutter, "'A Retreat from Profit': Colonization, the Appalachian Trail, and the Social Roots of Benton MacKaye's Wilderness Advocacy," *Environmental History*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Oct., 1999), 553-577.

⁹¹ William Smythe, *City Homes on Country Lanes: Philosophy and Practice of the Home-in-a-Garden* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1921), 26-27.

⁹² John Nolen, "Types of City Plans," *The American Architect*, 18 February 1920.

depend entirely on the land.”⁹³ It seemed to many conservationists that rural planning would constitute the next wave of the conservationist movement.

After World War I, facing the reality that a democracy based on cooperation and sustainable development was incompatible with prevailing economic trends, Smythe and other conservationists, like some Country Lifers, came to forcefully challenge the dominant ideal of progress. In his 1921 book, *City Homes on Country Lanes*, Smythe attached a spiritual meaning to rural life while unleashing a forceful attack on city life. He believed that the creation of garden and farm cities would help lead to a “New Earth” on which people would remain connected to nature, but he argued that people would have to abandon their crass materialism and its association with progress. He cautioned that:

It is probable that future development will proceed along two well-marked and divergent lines. In one line the social and spiritual considerations will be subordinated to the production of wealth. In the other, the production of wealth, as represented by large surplus crops for world markets, will be subordinated to the higher good of humanity. The former will require the use of broad acres, labor-saving machinery, and great numbers of hired hands; for it will be industrial farming pure and simple. The latter will be the home-in-a-garden with organized garden and farm cities. Organization will begin with wholesale purchase and improvement of land, going on through all departments of their social and economic life, and reach upward to spiritual heights.⁹⁴

Smythe, whose *Conquest of Arid America* (1905) placed him in the vanguard of conservationist ideology, was deeply concerned with the population growth of the cities and the condition of agriculture, and he clearly saw rural planning as the key to more sustainable growth. In his eyes, World War I had accelerated the decline of rural life by forcing mechanization on farmers. American farmers may have grown more productive per man as a result, but their per-acre production had declined along with soil fertility. “[W]e may be dying on the land economically, as well as socially and spiritually, because

⁹³ Smythe, *City Homes on Country Lanes*, 219.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 222.

of an overdose of machinery.”⁹⁵ Keeping people on the land, he believed, was the key to maintaining both sustainable growth and democracy. A utopian thinker who had been involved with co-operative colonization experiments of the West twenty years earlier, Smythe embraced the trend toward rural and urban planning as a positive step towards this end.⁹⁶

Similarly Frederick Newell, now a private citizen after his dismissal from the Reclamation Service in 1914, attempted to steer the conservationist movement further away from ideals of material progress and toward the Jeffersonian vision of a yeoman democracy. The “fundamental purpose” of conservation policy, he claimed in 1923, “is not merely the increase of material prosperity—or even of adding to the food supply of the nation, important as this may be at the time. The real objective rises to a far higher level, that of ministering to...the social and spiritual needs of the people through making possible the creation of the small self-supporting farm home, in which may be exemplified the American ideas of ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’”⁹⁷ Newell, who in 1921 became the chief consulting engineer of the Farm Cities Corporation, evidently came to believe that more organized rural planning would lead to this vision. By 1921, the idea of Farm City had become a symbol of a broader conservationist challenge to the prevailing materialism and interdependence of the growing urban-industrial order. When Thomas Adams and John Nolen collaborated with Hugh MacRae to build Farm City, they were pursuing the same conservationist dream.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 45.

⁹⁶ For more on Smythe and his role in the conservation movement, including his homestead vision, see Lawrence B. Lee, “William Ellsworth Smythe and the Irrigation Movement: A Reconsideration,” *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Aug., 1972), 289-311.

⁹⁷ Frederick H. Newell, “The National Problem of Land Reclamation,” *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Apr., 1923), 337.

Just as conservationists moved toward planned co-operative communities as the best way to achieve their social goals, many Country Lifers came to promote them for the same reasons. World War I forced the central paradox of the Country Life philosophy to the surface of debate, revealing the rift that had developed between those who favored economic solutions to the country life problem and those who favored social solutions.⁹⁸ In 1919, a group of the former founded the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), and a group of the latter formed the American Country Life Association (ACLA). While both inherited from the prewar Country Lifers a deep desire to make rural life more efficient and conserve soil fertility, they ultimately differed on means and ends. An examination of their similarities and differences can shed some light on the postwar direction of rural reform and the diverging paths of conservationists and agricultural reformers.

Viewing “efficiency” primarily in terms of agricultural productivity, the AFBF, according to its initial constitution, was established to “correlate and strengthen the work of the state farm bureau federations, to represent and protect the business and economic interest of agriculture, and to represent the farmers of the entire nation.”⁹⁹ A great rural civilization, its leaders maintained, could only be achieved on the basis of economic prosperity and strengthened ties to urban-industrial capitalism. It would be a mistake to encourage farmers to produce more for home consumption, president James Howard argued, because it “would mean either to lower the standard of living upon the farms of this country or to decrease production to that degree which must depopulate our cities and

⁹⁸ This rift is discussed in Bowers, *Country Life Movement in America*, 90-92.

⁹⁹ “A National Farmers’ Federation,” *Indiana Farmer’s Guide*, 25 October 1919.

greatly disturb our industries.”¹⁰⁰ Greater commercialization would ultimately solve the social and political problems they faced.¹⁰¹ Although they regretted the loss of farmers to the cities, the Farm Bureau generally did not emphasize the need to stem the urban migration. The lesson they learned from the experience of World War I was that greater economic efficiency and mechanization reduced the labor requirement needed to meet the growing urban food needs.

Members of the American Country Life Association (ACLA), on the other hand, believed that improving “efficiency” meant not only boosting agricultural production but also improving social life. These men and women took a different lesson away from the experiences of World War I. Pointing to the success with which government efforts promoted greater community organization during the war, they came to believe more strongly that improving community life through planning and organization would resuscitate country life. They remained wary of the depopulation of the countryside and continued the original Country Life mission of improving the “welfare of men and women, of boys and girls, in respect to their education, their health, their neighborliness, [and] their moral and religious welfare.”¹⁰² Economic success, they believed, should be only a means to a greater end, but rural people should not rely passively on economic success to solve all their problems. As E.C. Lindeman cautioned, “economic causes do

¹⁰⁰ James Howard, “Address of the President of the American Farm Bureau Federation,” *Proceedings of the Thirty-Fourth Annual Convention of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges held at Springfield, MA, October 19-22, 1920* (Burlington, VT: Free Press, 1921), 37.

¹⁰¹ Following the war, agricultural agitation led to the formation of the Farm Bloc in Congress, a group of congressmen from farming states that pushed for some of the same changes advocated by the farm bureau; see Phillips Bradley, “The Farm Bloc,” *Journal of Social Forces*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (May 1925), 714-718.

¹⁰² Kenyon Butterfield, “The Work of the Committee on Country Life,” in *Proceedings of the First Annual National Country Life Conference*, 26. In his call for a national agriculture policy, the president of the Association of American Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations, Eugene Davenport, outlined a plan that included better public schools for rural areas, an attack on speculation and land tenancy, promotion of conservation measures, and a call for public recognition of the farmer as a “typical democrat,” see Eugene Davenport, “Address of the President of the Association of Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations,” in *Proceedings of the First Annual National Country Life Conference*, 188-190.

not produce social effects.”¹⁰³ The ACLA firmly believed in the peoples’ ability to affect change by organizing. Community members had it in themselves to drastically improve country life as long as they were willing to invest time and energy into the community and resist the temptations of the expanding consumer economy.¹⁰⁴ The rift exposed by World War I between these two remnants of the Country Life Movement would grow wider throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and the fate of Farm City idea hung in the balance.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Eduard C. Lindeman, “Social Implications of the Farmers’ Co-operative Marketing Movement,” *Journal of Social Forces*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (May, 1923), 450.

¹⁰⁴ Kenyon Butterfield, who became an advisor to the Farm Cities Corporation, explained it thusly: “We agree that the economic motive is a worthy and dominant one, that a great rural civilization must be founded upon reasonable economic prosperity. We even assert that a rural democracy can be secured only as farmers get economic justice; that is, only as they have a fair return for their labor. But we want to make it clear to everybody, certainly to ourselves, that the end of all of these efforts for economic effectiveness is human welfare, and not the possibilities of still more profit. We know indeed that the possession of worldly goods, the over-emphasis upon material gains, may even be detrimental to the highest welfare of humankind. We stand for the idea that welfare is a greater thing than wealth;” see Kenyon Butterfield, “The Work of the Committee on Country Life,” *Proceedings of the First Annual National Country Life Conference* (Geneva, NY: American Country Life Association), 26-27.

¹⁰⁵ Among the points of disagreement between the two remnant elements of the Country Life Movement was the role of the local county extension agent. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914, one of the legislative achievements of the Country Lifers, mandated that land-grant colleges offer extension education through local agents in every county in the nation, but almost from the beginning there was disagreement over the role that extension agents should play in local communities. The experience of World War I would aggravate those tensions. The farm bureau believed that the extension agent should specialize in agricultural economics and work to promote the economic interests of the farmers by teaching him better cultivation methods, marketing strategies, and home economics, among other things. The American Country Life Association, on the other hand, viewed the extension agent as a community leader, someone who could speak not only to the agricultural needs of farmers, but also to their spiritual, health, and recreational needs. “We are all servants of the community,” Butterfield declared. “The mission of the extension service during reconstruction is nothing less than to serve mightily in helping to lay the foundation for a fuller and more real American rural democracy.” For a discussion on the American Farm Bureau Federation and its views on extension work, see Orville M. Kile, *The Farm Bureau Movement* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1921). Pete Daniel also discusses at some length the role of the Agricultural Extension Service in aiding the transformation of cotton, tobacco, and rice cultures into agribusinesses. “This well-intended government intrusion helped the more educated and aggressive farmers to survive, while those who were marginal gradually disappeared from the land,” he wrote; see Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 13-14. For more on the ACLA’s position on extension work, see Kenyon Butterfield, “Extension Problems of Reconstruction,” *Proceedings of the First Annual National Country Life Conference* (Geneva, NY: American Country Life Association), 207. For more on the community organization movement, see Dwight Sanderson and Robert Polson, *Rural Community Organization* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1939), 414; E. C. Lindeman, “Aspects of Community Organization in Relation to Public Policy,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 105, Public Welfare in the United States (Jan., 1923), 83-87;

Amidst growing realization that “local community life is unsatisfactory under the civilization which is dominated by industry,” the conservation-minded wing of the pre-war Country Life Movement began pushing for the same kind of community planning on unused lands that Lane, MacKaye, and other conservationists had come to embrace.¹⁰⁶ As early as 1915, Liberty H. Bailey called for “country planning” to go along with the new trend of city planning, but after the war, the idea gained more traction.¹⁰⁷ In 1921, ACLA President Kenyon Butterfield promoted the idea of country planning, starting with the establishment of “the farm city.” The idea, he said, “is to build a farm colony or rural community large enough so that it can maintain not only all necessary distinctly rural institutions, but can also become nearly self-contained industrially.”¹⁰⁸ After having dismissed the idea of planned farm villages in 1905 as “of doubtful value,” Butterfield came to see such an endeavor as part of “the key to the rural civilization of the future.”¹⁰⁹

As Country Life conservationists realized that sustainable development required structural changes to rural life, Hugh MacRae’s experiments in colonization attracted

¹⁰⁶ E. C. Lindeman, an advisor to Farm City, and others believed that rural communities suffered from a lack of democratic spirit, weak institutions, extreme conservatism, and a host of other factors. Jesse Steiner, a professor of Social Technology at the University of North Carolina who wrote extensively on the community organization movement, blamed social agencies with conflicting objectives, the mobility of the industrial population, and the persistence of racial, sectarian, and class prejudice. Others believed that the dominance of local markets by distant corporations undermined the productive capacity of rural residents. For many community organizers in the South and elsewhere, the forces of disorganization were so strong that they grew disillusioned with the prospect of betterment. Lindeman, “Aspects of Community Organization in Relation to Public Policy,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 86; see also Jesse Frederick Steiner, “Community Disorganization,” *Journal of Social Forces*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Jan., 1924), 177-187; See also Steiner, *The American Community in Action: Case Studies of American Communities* (New York: Henry Holt, 1928).

¹⁰⁷ Bailey wrote that “At last we shall call on the engineer for the greatest conquest of all—how to divide the surface of the earth so...that we may utilize every piece of land to fullest advantage,” he wrote. “It means that there will be on each holding the proper relation of tilled land and pasture land and forest land, and that the outlets for the farmer and his products will be the readiest and the simplest that it is possible to make;” L. H. Bailey, *Holy Earth* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1915), 58-59.

¹⁰⁸ Kenyon Butterfield, “The Community Idea in Rural Development,” *Papers and Proceedings of the Fifteenth Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Society, Washington, D.C.* Vol. 15 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*; for his views on farm villages in 1905, see Butterfield, “The Social Problems of American Farmers,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 10, No. 5 (Mar., 1905,) 611.

sustained nationwide attention. Journalists, politicians, and academics, from Ida Tarbell and Edwin Bjorkman to Franklin Lane, Carl Taylor, and J.R. Pillsbury visited the colonies in the immediate postwar years and spoke in glowing terms of MacRae's successes. The editorial board of *Collier's Weekly*, for example, wrote that "For the man, woman, youth, or girl who...sighs for self-reliant, independent living, for making a job instead of taking one, producing instead of manipulating production—colonies and farm cities built on the MacRae plan offer a new world of opportunity."¹¹⁰ The increased attention to MacRae's colonies stemmed from the greater national focus on the South as the new site for large-scale reclamation projects. In 1919, the Interior Department sent engineer H. T. Cory to survey the resources of the South to determine the potential for reclamation projects that would facilitate soldier colonization. His report was highly favorable. "The frontier, from an agricultural point of view, of the United States is no longer West and North, but the coastal plain of the South," he told a crowd at the Southern Land Congress in Savannah, Georgia.¹¹¹ Citing the availability of cheap, unused, and fertile soil, as well as the receptivity of southerners to the idea, he was convinced that "a very large minority, if not half," of soldier settlements should be located in the South. Following the debates over the soldier settlement bills and through the 1930s, colonization promoters would increasingly turn their attention to the South.

Such attention translated into widespread support for Farm City from both Country Lifers and conservationists. Indeed, John Nolen's design for Farm City resembled nothing less than a conservationists' utopia. It fused the national vision of the Country Lifers with that of the conservationists on a small community scale that could fit

¹¹⁰ "The City in the Country," *Colliers Weekly*, 15 July 1922.

¹¹¹ H. T. Cory, "Observations of the South's Opportunities and Adaptability," *Reclamation Record*, Vol. 10 (February 1919), 53.

within the social order of the Jim Crow South. Following the recommendations of George Perkins Marsh, H. T. Cory, Liberty Hyde Bailey, and others, Farm City contained a fixed ratio between forestland, pasture, and farmland. In addition to five woodlots and a public pasturage for the use of all colonists, it contained a fixed acreage of farmland for around two hundred farms with farm sizes ranging from two to forty acres, which provided an incentive for farmers to increase their holdings without crowding out their neighbors. Reflecting the influence of the Country Life Movement, Farm City also included a country club, a public pond with a boat house, a recreational forest with trails, playgrounds, a large field for recreation, and river access for all colonists. All roads in Farm City led to the Community Center, which included a village green, a business district, an inn, a library, a museum, and a school. It also contained space for small industries and housing for industrial and farm laborers.¹¹² As the *Collier's Weekly* editorial board remarked, "Farm City will be equipped to take care of what it grows and to supply many of its own essential wants."¹¹³

Although it perhaps appears overly idealistic in hindsight, Farm City, in the eyes of its supporters, as Carl Taylor put it, was "not Utopian." It was an earnest attempt to use the latest in city and rural planning to build on the prevailing intellectual trends of the conservationist and Country Life movements. While the two movements approached the problem of rural life from different positions, they found common ground within the promises of reclamation. For Country Lifers like Taylor, E.C. Lindeman, Kenyon Butterfield, E.C. Branson, Ray Stannard Baker, Olive Campbell, and Eugene Davenport,

¹¹² This information on Farm City was taken from John Nolen's plans; see John Nolen and Philip Foster, Proposed Farm City, Pender County, North Carolina, North Carolina Historical Collection Maps, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

¹¹³ "The City in the Country," *Collier's Weekly*, 15 July 1921.

Farm City offered an opportunity “for building more complete and more perfectly planned rural communities than any naturally developed rural community in America.”¹¹⁴ It would be used as a demonstration to show reluctant conservatives, particularly in the agricultural South, the benefits of intensive and co-operative farming. For conservationists like Gifford Pinchot, Frederick Newell, Elwood Mead, H.T. Cory, George Bird Grinnell, and C. J. Blanchard, it held the potential to demonstrate the way to reclaim unused lands in a way that would fulfill their original yeoman vision and the promise of sustainable rural development. Despite their different approaches to Farm City, the Country Lifers and conservationists ultimately shared the same vision: a countryside peopled with happy white yeomen in tight-knit communities.

The support of these two elements for Farm City suggests that their original goal of establishing a healthy, rural, herrenvolk democracy was not destroyed by World War I. It was merely obscured. As industrial farming enhanced its position in the agricultural sector, the Farm Cities Corporation provided an alternate path for organizing farmers, a path that would maintain the population’s connection to the land while embracing the role of corporations in securing that goal. All farmers and capitalists had to do to help revolutionize rural life along sustainable democratic lines, they maintained, was place social and spiritual ideals ahead of material desires.

The establishment of the Farm Cities Corporation in late 1921 initially brought a wave of optimism among progressive reformers across the nation, many of whom were or would soon be familiar with MacRae’s efforts in colonization. *Leslie’s Illustrated* predicted that “there will be more and more of this sort of intelligently planned small-farm development, for people are beginning to wake up to the fact that the time is past

¹¹⁴ Taylor, *Rural Sociology*, 133.

when communities can afford to continue the laissez-faire methods of the past.”¹¹⁵ They certainly had reason for optimism. Farm City brought together the nation’s foremost experts in city and regional planning, conservation, and country life, all of whom had learned important lessons from their two decades of reform efforts. Indeed, their ambitions were grand. The optimism surrounding Farm City, however, would be short lived. Within a year of its incorporation, the Farm Cities Corporation folded after it failed to attract private investments. After all, the country life and conservationist movements had largely run their course in the public’s eyes. To many urban-oriented reformers, the industrial reorganization of agriculture had apparently solved the problem of agricultural production, and the concerns of the conservation movement had turned away from its original agrarian vision. Americans had largely come to accept the new urban dominance of American life. Nevertheless, the campaign for Farm City would continue through the 1920s, and it would be increasingly led by southerners in an attempt to save the region’s rural identity.

¹¹⁵ “Making Farming Attractive,” *Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly*, 24 December 1921.

CHAPTER 3

THE CAUSE OF SOUTHERN RECLAMATION AND THE CONSERVATION MOVEMENT IN THE 1920s

In September of 1921, Ben Dixon MacNeil's heart-wrenching portrayal of southern poverty was plastered across the front page of the *Raleigh News & Observer*. "John Smith—The Tale of a Tar Heel Tenant, of His Blind, Ignorant, Hopeless Struggle Against a System That He's Powerless to Fix" awakened many North Carolinians to the plight of tenant farmers. By age 23, John Smith's eight siblings and parents had died and left him with a load of debt. He married and had 10 children, three of whom died in infancy. Year in and year out, he grew cotton and corn, but never grew enough to get out of debt to his landlord. Living off of \$300 per year, he only earned about \$250. He struggled to keep his family alive despite their hard work, and at 51, his remaining family was perhaps the only thing he had to show for his 28 years of farming. "Oblivion will swallow him and his children," MacNeil wrote. "He is the next big question for North Carolina to answer."¹

North Carolinians, indeed, attempted to answer the tenant riddle. John Smith's plight sparked a focused public discussion of the tenancy problem, its causes and possible

¹ Ben Dixon MacNeill, "John Smith—The Tale of a Tar Heel Tenant, Of His Blind, Ignorant, Hopeless Struggle Against a System He is Powerless to Fix," *The News & Observer*, 25 September 1921.

solutions. In 1923, General E. F. Glenn, a World War I veteran and North Carolina reformer, noted the state's "large and rapidly increasing number of citizens who have been studying the questions of farming."² Some continued to blame the tenants themselves for their condition, suggesting that they needed to adopt more industrious and thrifty habits.³ However, many saw tenancy as merely one symptom of broader structural problems of the nation's economy, or as W. O. Saunders of the *Elizabeth City Independent* wrote, "but one aggravating phase of our capitalistic system."⁴ The editor of the *Sampson Democrat*, O. J. Peterson, similarly blamed Smith's condition, "as well as that of every other overworked and underpaid class," on a "deep-seated derangement in world economy."⁵ E. C. Branson, a rural economics professor at the University of North Carolina, believed the common law meaning of property unfairly favored speculators and capitalists who had no intentions of putting land into productive use.⁶ These North Carolinians were willing to entertain radical solutions to the farm problem. Peterson called for an international system of currency and the abolition of tariffs worldwide. Saunders called for "a more respectful study of Bolshevism" as a way to learn more about mollifying the poor masses.⁷ Clarence Poe, editor of the *Progressive Farmer* and member of the State Board of Agriculture, called for a system of old age pensions, state

² E. F. Giles, "Gen. Giles Urges Passage of Giles' Farm Land Bill," *News & Observer*, 29 January 1923.

³ See, for example, Maxcy John, "What's Wrong With John Smith?" *News & Observer* 29 September 1921.

⁴ W. O. Saunders, "What's Wrong With John Smith?" *News & Observer*, 27 September 1921.

⁵ O. J. Peterson, "On Behalf the Forgotten Man," *News & Observer*, 4 October 1921.

⁶ E.C. Branson and J.A. Dickey, "How Farm Tenants Live," *University of North Carolina Extension Bulletin*, 16 November 1922.

⁷ Saunders wrote that "we can educate every boy and girl in North Carolina and only a few of them can get ahead because getting ahead implies getting ahead of somebody else. That is what we have all been doing for thousands of years, each one of us striving to get ahead of every one else, with the result that the combined productivities of many who do not get ahead are necessary to pay the interest, rents, and profits exacted by those who do get ahead;" see Saunders, "What's Wrong with John Smith?" *News & Observer* 27 September 1921.

aid for home ownership, and “relief from usury,” among other things.⁸ To these Tar Heels, the tenant problem threatened the entire political and social order. Referring to the Russian Revolution, Saunders warned that “we are going to have the same revolutionary experiment here in America if the upper classes do not find a better way for the humble worker to secure economic independence.”⁹ Branson asked bluntly, “can a civilization forever endure on the basis of political freedom and economic serfdom?”¹⁰ The plight of John Smith set the wheels in motion for a movement that promised to fulfill the original goals of the country life conservationists.

In the midst of such a reform atmosphere in North Carolina, Hugh MacRae found fertile ground for his colonization scheme, but it was ground in which he was deeply ambivalent about sowing his reform seeds. After the failure of the Farm Cities Corporation in 1922, Hugh MacRae must have felt betrayed by the system to which he devoted much of his life. For the previous two decades, he had tried to establish colonization on a sound business model. He had consistently stood by the conviction that private corporations could act benevolently in the interests of public welfare by implementing the principles of conservationism as he saw them, but by 1923, that faith had begun to erode. Despite its hopeful start and its association with the nation’s foremost experts in regional planning, conservation, and country life, the Farm Cities Corporation could not attract enough support from private investors nationwide to get off the ground. Yet, MacRae did not withdraw in his defeat, and he did not abandon his attempt to build Farm City. He held his nose and turned to the state of North Carolina for

⁸ Clarence Poe, “Help Tenant Help Himself, Says Poe,” *News & Observer*, 25 September 1921.

⁹ Saunders, “What’s Wrong with John Smith?” *News & Observer* 27 September 1921;

¹⁰ E. C. Branson, “Farm Tenancy in the Cotton Belt: How Farm Tenants Live,” *Journal of Social Forces*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Mar., 1923), 220.

a resolution to the impasse, and when that did not work, he pushed for the U.S. Reclamation Service to extend reclamation projects to the South.

The campaign for southern reclamation, led primarily by Elwood Mead and Hugh MacRae, was an attempt to use the resources of the federal reclamation program to build colonies like Farm City in the unused farmlands across the South. Throughout the 1920s, they gained support from an increasing number of southerners who favored social solutions to the rural problem and hoped to preserve the agrarian character of the South while bolstering the number of white farmers on the land. As many agricultural reformers steered toward economic reform by way of subsidies and better tariff protection, this group continued the community organization theory that rural life could be revived by better economic and social cooperation between farmers. These reforms could only succeed if southern agriculture was transformed from its extensive, single-cash-crop economy to a more diversified and self-sustaining type of farming based on intensive cultivation of small holdings. Rather than promote interracial cooperation in existing communities, these reformers saw the establishment of planned, racially homogeneous communities in the unused lands of the South as the best hope for pushing reluctant white southern farmers to adopt these changes. However, the transformation of rural life was not the basic factor motivating this group of reformers. Concerned with the growing numbers of landless poor and the depletion of natural resources, specifically soil and eventually forests, they continued to see the preservation of rural life as the means to securing a sustainable national future, both economically and socially. This logic places them as direct intellectual descendants of the original Country Life conservationists.

However, the intellectual atmosphere within the conservation movement was something entirely different from what it was before World War I. As conservation policy drifted further away from the original goals of the Country Life conservationists, the U.S. Reclamation Service found its original mission under constant threat by the Departments of Agriculture and Commerce, as well as the growing influence of the National Park Service within the Department of the Interior. By the late 1920s, the campaign for southern reclamation had become trapped between an agricultural lobby that pushed for better profitability and limited production on one hand and a conservation ideology that emphasized sport, recreation, and multi-purpose river development on the other. By the onset of the Great Depression, southern reclamation had become a lost cause.

In December, 1922, the State Board of Agriculture sought to build on the public sentiment generated by John Smith's story and appointed a Tenancy Commission, comprised of E. C. Branson, Carl C. Taylor, E.C. Lindeman, Clarence Poe, and C.C. Wright, to investigate the conditions of the state's tenant population. According to the resolution passed by the board, "the alarming increase in tenancy presents one of the most serious problems now confronting the farmers of our state and other states...Our public men as well as our agricultural leaders are now becoming aroused to the seriousness of this evil."¹¹ The Commission, which included four early backers of Farm City, surveyed close to one thousand tenant farmers, white and black, in three counties across the state. Their findings painted a dire picture of the situation that existed on nearly half of North Carolina's farms. The average tenant family lived on 23 cents per

¹¹ North Carolina Tenancy Commission, 1922, *Economic and Social Conditions of North Carolina Farmers*, Documenting the American South, University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/ncfarmers/farmers.html>.

person per day, ate fatty meat and biscuits for sustenance, and lived in homes in which “it is possible to study astronomy through the holes in the roof and geology through the cracks in the floor.”¹² None of those surveyed had running water, and only eight had an outhouse. There was little wonder why nearly one-third of children born in tenant households died before reaching adulthood. Furthermore, the survey found that farmers were having difficulty climbing from landless to landowner. The agricultural ladder was broken.¹³

The survey also found a pitiable social life among poor tenants. They exhibited a general lack of participation in “wholesome recreation,” which included picnics, movies, holiday celebrations, dances, and lectures. Most did not participate in social events outside of their family and/or church. In the churches, the surveyors found that “not social affairs in this world but salvation in the next world is the core of religious consciousness in our country regions.”¹⁴ For Branson, the findings of the committee supported the view that social reform would likely have the best chance of improving the tenants’ lot, for “it is social disabilities that destroy values of every sort, economic, civic, and religious alike—farm values and incomes, store business and profits, neighborhood life and enterprise, community morals, law and order, country government efficiency and church development.”¹⁵ He claimed that farmers’ lack of involvement with a community larger than the church and family contributed to the development of a “private-local mind” that became the “ultimate obstacle to country community life and cooperative farm

¹² E.C. Branson and J.A. Dickey, “How Farm Tenants Live,” *University of North Carolina Extension Bulletin*, 16 November 1922.

¹³ North Carolina Tenancy Commission, 1922, *Economic and Social Conditions of North Carolina Farmers*, Documenting the American South, University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/ncfarmers/farmers.html>

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 36.

¹⁵ Branson and Dickey, “How Farm Tenants Live,” 37.

enterprise.”¹⁶ Furthermore, tenant farmers frequently switched residences in their lifetimes, which commonly meant they had to find new communities. Branson saw this as another impediment to community organization. This lack of community sense, he concluded, is the ultimate reason for the cityward drift of the rural population. For Branson, the Tenancy Commission’s study merely confirmed what he and many other Country Lifers had long suspected: the farmers’ problem was largely a social problem. If they could be given a chance to own their own farms and, thus, strengthen a sense of community in the countryside, social reform could make life happier in the countryside.

The problem with that theory, however, was putting it into practice. Branson and Dickey must have had doubts about whether white and black families they interviewed would work together for the common good of the community. Although the authors do not comment specifically on race, the survey’s statistics suggest that the color line was a significant hindrance to community development. Black families were nearly twice as likely to switch residences in their lifetime. They were more than twice as likely to avoid participation in community recreation, and yet, they were much more likely to receive visitors at their home.¹⁷ This suggests that black families were not hostile to community life, as many white country lifers claimed. Rather, they defined their communities along more personal lines and did not identify with the larger geographic community. That can help explain why black families, when asked their opinions on matters of community improvement, such as cooperation, consolidated schools, law and order, and better infrastructure, were overwhelmingly indifferent (61 percent compared to whites’ 22

¹⁶ Ibid, 35.

¹⁷ The average white owner operators had participated in 3.8 forms of community recreation the preceding year, whereas black owner operators had participated in 1.8.

percent).¹⁸ Black families were less likely to identify with the geographic community and were, thus, less likely to care if the community improved. For Branson and others, this provided further evidence that a campaign to promote community cooperation in existing communities of white and black tenants could achieve only limited success at best. Forming entirely new, racially homogeneous communities provided a way to bring about more fully functioning cooperative communities.

While they rarely addressed the issue of race directly, thus appearing to implicitly support the idea of colonizing black farmers, proponents of colonization were clearly focused only on the white community. When H. T. Cory investigated the feasibility of southern soldier colonization in 1919, he observed that although “the unanimity was absolute” in favor of creating colonies of both races, “the opinion was almost unanimously expressed by the Southern men that the negroes should be segregated and kept to themselves.”¹⁹ Yet, after 1919, there was a conspicuous lack of discussion on race among proponents of colonization. The absence of a discussion of race suggests that this was no attempt to disturb the status quo. Interestingly, one could have read MacNeil’s entire article on the plight of John Smith and never found a clue that he was indeed a white tenant. It was likely just assumed. In addition to the fact that “negroes” were always labeled as such according to common journalistic practice in the South at the time, tenancy had a different face in the Tar Heel state. In stark contrast to the cotton belt states, North Carolina had considerably more farms operated by white tenants than black

¹⁸ North Carolina Tenancy Commission, 1922, *Economic and Social Conditions of North Carolina Farmers*, Documenting the American South, University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/ncfarmers/farmers.html>.

¹⁹ Ibid, 54.

tenants.²⁰ Furthermore, to many white North Carolinians, tenancy had become a “problem” because it increasingly presented a daunting prospect for white families. Indeed, MacNeil pinned the origins of the “problem of the tenant farmer” not on the development of black tenancy after the Civil War but on the post-Reconstruction era when “the tenant system enveloped the entire free non-landowning population.”²¹ Fixing the tenant problem meant finding a way to keep white farmers on the land, which, in turn, meant finding a way to get white farmers to cooperate.

To Branson and other colonization proponents, the prospect of creating entirely new communities on unused lands seemed like a way to organize communities without relying on interracial cooperation. In 1921, Branson visited Elwood Mead in California and observed the detailed workings of the state-supported Durham and Delhi colonies. Following the anti-climactic dissolution of the Farm Cities Corporation, he turned to the California colonies as the best hope for the state. In their 1922 pamphlet entitled “How Farm Tenants Live,” Branson and J. A. Dickey pushed for the creation of a land settlement board that would investigate colonization schemes in California and elsewhere and offer guidance to a similar program for North Carolina. “With 100,000 vacant city lots, 22,000,000 acres of idle farm land, and 1,380,000 landless, homeless people, town and country,” they wrote, “it is high time we were considering proposed remedies of any sort whatsoever.”²² This proposition, however, was to include only white families.

Although he called black tenants “worthy,” Branson claimed that “Negro tenants need

²⁰ While the census did not provide statistics on the number of white and black tenant farmers, it did record the number of farms operated by white and black tenants. According to the 1920 Census, there were 63,000 farms operated by white tenant farmers and 53,000 farms operated by black tenant farmers in North Carolina. *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920, Agriculture* (Washington: GPO, 1922), 191.

²¹ MacNeil, “John Smith—The Tale of a Tar Heel Tenant, Of His Blind, Ignorant, Hopeless Struggle Against a System He is Powerless to Fix,” *The News & Observer*, 25 September 1921.

²² *Ibid.*, 47.

such aid less than white tenants, because under prevailing conditions they are acquiring farms of their own faster than the whites are doing in every southern state.”²³ While the Tenancy Commission survey supports this assertion—black families were rising from the tenant class into ownership at a faster rate—it also showed that a far greater proportion of black families were landless.²⁴ Branson’s claim was merely a justification for dodging the thorny issue of race and overlooking the complicated relationship between race and labor.

Branson, MacRae and other supporters of community planning realized after the collapse of the Farm Cities Corporation that only state-supported colonies on the Mead model could provide the financing and direction needed for successful community building. According to Branson, “there is no other way worth considering in North Carolina.”²⁵ Upon the opening of the 1923 session of the General Assembly, MacRae, Branson, and Taylor, among others, lobbied for a state-supported colonization plan and quickly got a bill. Senator D. F. Giles had recently introduced a bill that attempted to ameliorate the conditions of tenant farmers through the creation of county farm loan boards and one statewide board comprised of political appointees. These boards would provide long-term loans to tenant farmers across the state with the capacity for home ownership, but MacRae and company convinced Giles to substitute his original bill for a colonization bill. Combining conservationist goals with social reform, the new bill created one statewide “Farm Land Board,” comprised not of political appointees but

²³ Ibid, 41.

²⁴ In the surveyed area, some 20 percent of the white farmers surveyed were farm owners, whereas only 3 percent of the black families surveyed owned their own farms; Ibid. This generally holds true for the South as a whole. Some 39 percent of all white farmers in the South were tenants in 1920, while more than 76 percent of black farmers were tenants. *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920, Agriculture* (Washington: GPO, 1922), 191.

²⁵ Branson and Dickey, “How Farm Tenants Live,” 39.

“agricultural experts” from the universities and the state bureaucracy. Instead of improving existing farm communities, it focused on land settlement in eastern North Carolina, granting the farm land board the power to appropriate unused lands, plan and develop entire communities, and provide credit to tenant families.²⁶ Although the bill contained no specific language regarding the racial composition of the communities, it did provide the farm land board with the discretion to deny any applicant “who does not satisfy the board as to his or her fitness to successfully cultivate and develop the land to be purchased.”²⁷

Calling it “the most important legislation that will be presented to this General Assembly,” MacRae, Branson, Taylor, and other supporters saw this bill as part of a “great land settlement movement” that would lead to a new millennium in southern rural life.²⁸ “We will do all we can to start this movement,” MacRae told state senator Charles Harris.²⁹ MacRae, Branson, and Taylor testified before the Senate Committee on Agriculture and convinced its members to visit MacRae’s colonies to observe for themselves the possibilities of colonization. After their visit in February, the contingent of sixteen representatives was “astonished” and “surprised” to see farmers making so much money on ten-acre farms with no tenants, and they seemed optimistic about the plan. “The possibilities of the North Carolina farmer from the demonstration of this kind of small farm and intensive co-operative agriculture seem unlimited,” Harris remarked.³⁰

²⁶ “Another Hearing on Farm Loan Bill,” *News & Observer*, 28 January 1923.

²⁷ An Act Creating a Farm Land Board and Defining Its Powers and to Provide Funds for the Purchase of Farm Lands for Home Ownership in the State of North Carolina, S.B. 18, N.C. General Assembly, Session 1923.

²⁸ First quote is from “Another Hearing on Farm Bill,” *News & Observer*, 28 January 1923, and the second quote is from a letter, MacRae to Charles U. Harris, 16 March 1923, MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “Secure Data on Farming Colony,” *News & Observer*, 18 February 1923.

However, questions remained, specifically the feasibility of attracting North Carolina tenants to the new colonies. The southern tenant farmer, a staunch individualist who was used to farming only cotton, tobacco, and corn, was a much different creature than the Europeans on MacRae's farms, who had a tradition not only of small-scale intensive farming but also of cooperation and community spirit.³¹ In March, the Giles Bill, to the great dismay of MacRae and Branson, was gutted of its important provisions and then tabled.³² MacRae enlisted Harris to push the cause further in the N.C. Senate, but his attention increasingly turned to the federal government.

Over the next ten years, MacRae would play a central role in the campaign to extend the federal reclamation program to the South. After trying for years to start a reclamation movement in the South first with private financing and then with state financing, he turned to the federal government to achieve his goals. Convincing the federal government to go along with the program was, it turns out, not that hard. Debate over Interior Secretary Franklin K. Lane's soldier settlement bill first drew attention to the South as a possible site for reclamation projects, and Lane's successor (after Albert Fall), Herbert Work, was also sympathetic to the idea. When Elwood Mead took over as director of the Bureau of Reclamation in 1924, the movement to extend reclamation projects to the South gained significant steam. To understand why, it is necessary to revisit the broader changes taking place within the federal government over the direction of conservation policy.

When Mead took over control, the Bureau of Reclamation and, indeed, the entire conservation movement, was in the midst of an identity crisis. After being convicted of

³¹ See, for example, "Delegation Wonders What Tar Heel Tenant Would Do," *News & Observer*, 19 February 1923.

³² See "Giles Farm Loan Measure Goes to Table in Senate," *News & Observer*, 1 March 1923.

conspiracy and bribery as part of the Teapot Dome Scandal, Interior Secretary Albert Fall had been replaced by Hubert Work the previous year. Work was concerned about the future of the U.S. Reclamation Service, which faced increasing criticism from congressmen, agriculture reformers, and western officials over its financial instability, wasteful inefficiency, and dictatorial record. Citing the need for greater efficiency and business methods, he replaced Arthur P. Davis, an engineer and conservation bureaucrat, with David Davis, a politician and businessman, as head of the service, but such a move angered many conservationists, who began accusing the Reclamation Service of succumbing to the same kind of political cronyism for which the Interior Department had become infamous.³³ Determined to preserve the government's reclamation program amidst such strong criticism, Work decided to reorganize it. He replaced the tarnished name of the Reclamation Service with a new name, the Bureau of Reclamation. He abolished the position of Director and created the position of Commissioner, bringing in Elwood Mead, consummate conservationist and bureaucrat, to replace Davis, who was moved into the new position of Director of Reclamation Finance. Work hoped that the changes would both restore the reputation of federal reclamation among conservationists and chart a new direction for the program that was more fiscally sound.³⁴

On December 5, 1924, a group of congressmen attached a rider to an Interior Department appropriations bill that embodied the new direction of federal reclamation. Known as the Fact Finders' Act, the law attempted to increase the efficiency of the existing reclamation projects in the West by, among other things, effectively raising the qualifications for applicants to be accepted into the irrigation program. It also initiated

³³ See, for example, Stanley Frost, "Politics Gets the Reclamation Service," *Outlook*, 29 August 1923.

³⁴ For a good discussion over the transition of the Reclamation Service, see Donald Swain, *Federal Conservation Policy, 1921-1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 78-95.

policy changes to ensure that settlers paid a greater portion of construction and maintenance costs on existing reclamation projects. In the face of such changes, the measurement of success for the projects shifted further away from reestablishing Americans on the land and toward increasing the productivity of the land. Settlers, they maintained, must be more productive to cover the mounting costs of reclamation.³⁵

While these changes seemed to suggest that the Bureau of Reclamation had abandoned the democratic objectives of the original conservationists, the Fact Finders' Act also included a provision that, based on Hubert Work's interpretation, preserved the goal of a yeoman democracy. The provision, almost wholly ignored by historians, called for "investigations to be made by the Secretary of the Interior through the Bureau of Reclamation to obtain necessary information to determine how arid and semiarid, swamp, and cut-over timberlands in any of the States of the United States may be best developed."³⁶ Work's interpretation of this broad order reveals much about his vision for the conservation movement.³⁷ Basing it on the same philosophy espoused by Mead, MacRae, Lane, Newell, Pinchot, and even Roosevelt, Secretary Work believed that the purpose of conservation generally and reclamation specifically was to secure democratic ownership of the land and its natural resources. Widespread land ownership, he maintained, would lead to "wiser use of the land."³⁸ And Work, like Mead and Lane before him, believed that reclamation policy should move towards planned co-operative

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Reclamation and Rural Development in the South*, 69th Cong., 2d sess., House Document 765 (Washington, 1927), 1.

³⁷ Work appointed three men to conduct the investigation: Howard Elliot, chairman of the board of directors of the Northern Pacific Railway, George Soule, editor of *The National Review* and director of the National Bureau of Economic Research, and Daniel C. Roper, former commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service.

³⁸ Hubert Work to Howard Elliot, 9 November 1926, in U.S. Department of the Interior, *Reclamation and Rural Development in the South*, 69th Cong., 2d sess., House Document 765 (Washington, 1927), 1.

communities. “Farming communities must be planned and organized,” he told the investigating committee. Work helped formulate a “new meaning of reclamation” that addressed the shortcomings of earlier experiments in the West and adopted social goals as the primary concern. “Heretofore reclamation in the United States has been conceived as an undertaking merely in civil engineering to put water on dry lands or remove water from swamp land...It is now felt that land which has been ‘reclaimed’ in the engineering sense has not been reclaimed for human uses unless there exist upon it happy, prosperous people.”³⁹ This new policy of reclamation would not be carried out in the arid West but in the humid South, as Work chose to limit the investigation to North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. As the bureaucratic gears began to turn in this direction, it became clear that the Bureau of Reclamation had not abandoned its goal of reestablishing the yeomanry. Rather, the Fact Finders’ Act reflected an acceptance of the reality that western farmlands were going to be controlled by large-scale farmers. The place for establishing a yeoman democracy, they increasingly realized, was the South. “The next great wave of land settlement in this country will move from the North upon the South,” journalist Frank Bohn predicted in 1925.⁴⁰ The committee’s report, submitted to Congress in February of 1927, gave a full-throated endorsement for southern reclamation.

Conservationists shifted their gaze southward because they saw the region as the best hope for achieving the social goals of the conservation movement. In 1923, Frederick Newell had expressed hope that federal reclamation would be extended to all parts of the country so that more Americans could own “small self-sustaining homes,”

³⁹ Ibid, 2.

⁴⁰ Frank Bohn, “Southern Land Reclamation,” *New York Times*, 23 July 1925.

and the South became a logical place to achieve this.⁴¹ Work favored the South because it offered “a fine opportunity for making a demonstration” due to its vast agricultural potential and its consistent failure to meet that potential. In addition to large areas of cheap, uncultivated farmlands, as well as a favorable climate and proximity to national markets, the six states under investigation lost ten percent, or some 13 million acres, of its farmland between 1920 and 1925. Tenancy existed on upwards of 66 percent of the farms in some states.⁴² The South had become the nation’s agricultural liability, and Work believed the region had the most need for the benefits of reclamation. He also hoped that proving such colonization could succeed in the South would lead to similar projects across the nation. “It is my belief...that the lessons of your study in a single locality can be applied to all sections,” he told the investigating committee. “At least it will show the nature of the problems to be solved and lead the way to broader and more comprehensive inquiries when funds are available.”⁴³ Elwood Mead hoped that the southern experiments would lead to “the creation of a new social and intellectual life on the land.”⁴⁴

Most importantly, Mead and Work favored the South because they believed southerners would be extremely supportive of such a movement. Work’s investigating committee, believing that “local action is essential” to successful reclamation, discovered “an almost universal and deep concern about rural life” among southerners.⁴⁵ “With such keen interest in the problem, and so many who are willing to help, the example of model

⁴¹ F. H. Newell, “The National Problem of Land Reclamation,” *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Apr., 1923), 342.

⁴² U.S. Department of the Interior, *Reclamation and Rural Development in the South*, 69th Cong., 2d sess., House Document 765 (Washington, 1927), 14, 15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁴ Elwood Mead, “Pygmies in the Earth: a Plea for Rural Reconstruction in the South,” *Forum*, May 1928.

⁴⁵ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Reclamation and Rural Development in the South*, 69th Cong., 2d sess., House Document 765 (Washington, 1927), 23.

colonies if successful, would be likely to spread throughout the region.”⁴⁶ Similarly, Mead attributed the new southern focus of the Interior Department to the “spirit manifested in the South,” and “our conviction of the great good that may come out of this.”⁴⁷ The South, these conservationists believed, provided the last best chance for the successful reorganization of rural life.

Indeed, southerners were ready for such a movement. The push for southern reclamation gained some momentum beginning in the mid-1920s, and by the end of 1927, the Southern Reclamation Congress had formed and held its first convention in Washington, D.C. Within the year, the first of a series of colonization bills had been introduced to the U.S. House. These bills, known as the Lankford Bill (1928), the Simmons-Whittington Bill (1929), and the Crisp-McKellar Bill (1930), aimed to set up a demonstration colony similar to Farm City in each of the southern states (there were nine in the original bill, but by 1930, there were twelve, including Oklahoma, Missouri, and Texas). The bills gained some powerful proponents in Congress, who believed they were the best hope for the regeneration of southern rural life. Senator Lawrence D. Tyson of Tennessee believed the bills confronted “one of the most important subjects that has ever been brought to the attention of the country.” He told the Southern Reclamation Conference that “my heart and soul are in this thing.”⁴⁸ Mississippi congressman William Whittington echoed the sentiment. “There is a problem in the South in agriculture that can not be solved by ordinary farm legislation,” he told the House

⁴⁶ Ibid, 24.

⁴⁷ U. S. Department of the Interior, *Proceedings of the Southern Reclamation Conference, Held in Washington, D. C., December 14 and 15, 1927*, 70th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Document No. 45 (Washington, 1928), 16.

⁴⁸ U. S. Department of the Interior, *Proceedings of the Southern Reclamation Conference, Held in Washington, D. C., December 14 and 15, 1927*, 70th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Document No. 45 (Washington, 1928), 21, 28.

Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation. “There is a menace to rural life that we believe requires a new set-up and new organization.”⁴⁹

Aside from Mead, Hugh MacRae played arguably the most instrumental role in shifting the focus of reclamation to the South. Throughout the fall and winter of 1926-1927, as chairman of the Southern States Committee on Reclamation, MacRae traveled with Work’s investigating committee through the southeast, interviewing officials and academics and visiting potential colony sites. The committee toured MacRae’s colonies in southeastern North Carolina and called them “the most impressive demonstration of what is possible in the South.”⁵⁰ Touting a plan like Farm City as the solution, MacRae took the lead of a dedicated contingent of southerners who promoted the colonization bills in Congress and in the press. Mead and MacRae were the only two people who testified before every hearing of the colonization bills, but other prominent southerners who played significant roles in the cause included E. C. Branson, David Coker, a successful South Carolina farmer with significant political connections, W. W. Long, director of agricultural extension at the South Carolina Agricultural College, J. M. Patterson, a successful Georgia pecan grower, and a handful of railroad executives. Like Work and Mead, these southerners saw the colonization of reclaimed lands with planned communities as the best hope for rural life across the South and the nation.

There were many different reasons why this group of southerners championed colonization. Elements of romantic agrarianism and regional identity certainly animated them. They believed farming defined the character of the South and were reluctant to see

⁴⁹ U.S. House, Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation, *Creation of Organized Rural Communities to Demonstrate the Benefits of Planned Settlement and Supervised Rural Development*, 71st Cong., 2d sess., House Doc. No. 870 (Washington, 1930), 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 23.

that character change. As Louisiana Congressman Joseph Ransdell put it, “the bone and sinew of our land is among those who are close to the soil. Our brightest minds and staunchest patriots come from the country districts.”⁵¹ They agreed with Assistant Interior Secretary E. C. Finney, who said that “Man is happiest when closest to nature. The open country makes for health and happiness and breeds independence. In the soil are the germs of life.”⁵² However, preserving some romanticized southern agrarian society was not their primary motivation. They did not idealize country living. In fact, they criticized it most harshly and sought ways to radically transform it. They pulled no punches when they laid blame for the condition of southern country life on the “extreme conservatism” of the farmers themselves.⁵³ The cause of southern colonization was not a rear-guard action against modernity, a rejection of industrialism and urbanization in favor of moving everyone to small farms. Rather, it was based on the agrarianism of the Country Life conservationists, who desired sustainable, balanced growth.

From the testimony, magazine articles, and conference presentations provided by this group of southerners in relation to the colonization bills, it is clear that they were direct intellectual descendants of the original Country Life conservation Movement. They were deeply worried that the prevailing economic and demographic trends were not sustainable, both socially and environmentally. Population growth continued to elicit a Malthusian concern for resource use. Pointing to the day when “we have 250,000,000 people, perhaps more,” Senator Tyson declared that “it is our duty to our posterity to do

⁵¹ Joseph Ransdell, “The Great Undrained Empire of the South,” *Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the Southern Commercial Congress, Atlanta, Ga., March 1911* (Washington, 1911), 818.

⁵² U. S. Department of the Interior, *Proceedings of the Southern Reclamation Conference, Held in Washington, D. C., December 14 and 15, 1927*, 70th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Document No. 45 (Washington, 1928), 64.

⁵³ See, for example, David Coker’s critique of southern farming and proposed solution in Coker, “Defense of the Plan for Establishment of Federal-Financed Farm Colonies in the South,” *Manufacturer’s Record*, 20 March 1930.

our utmost now.”⁵⁴ They argued that absentee landlordism and large-scale capitalist farming was harmful to soil fertility, and they continued to promote the Jeffersonian idea that small home-owning farmers were the best stewards of the land. “Farming by tenants is destructive,” Branson told an audience at the Georgia Institute of Public Affairs in 1931. “[T]he only successful farming in the long run is farming by men who own the land they till, and till the land they own.”⁵⁵ Small farmers with a vested interest in their land would help restore the loss of soil fertility that occurred as a result of large-scale “soil mining.”

Although they favored the reclamation of southern swamplands, they ultimately believed that the expansionist tendencies of southern agriculture needed reforming. They saw reclamation as a way to demonstrate not only a more sustainable system of agriculture but also a more sustainable social organization.⁵⁶ Mississippi congressman William Whittington told the Southern Reclamation Conference, “Our last frontier has disappeared. The country must live within itself, and it is the part of good husbandry to protect our capital investment and restore by artificial means that which has been lost because of the demands of immediate necessity.”⁵⁷ Colonies on the model of Farm City would ultimately solve the resource waste problems inherent in extensive agriculture and timber harvesting by establishing a fixed ratio between farmland, pasture, and forestland

⁵⁴ Lawrence Tyson, “Opportunities of Tennessee for Organized Community Settlement,” in U. S. Department of the Interior, *Proceedings of the Southern Reclamation Conference, Held in Washington, D. C., December 14 and 15, 1927*, 70th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Document No. 45 (Washington, 1928), 28.

⁵⁵ E.C. Branson, “Directed Colonies of Farm Owners in the South,” *Proceedings of the Institute of Public Affairs*, 1931, 178.

⁵⁶ For example, at the Southern Reclamation Conference, Hugh MacRae quoted historian Charles Beard to drive home a point about national planning: “The coordination of agriculture and machine industry in the interests of a balanced economy, related to the task of maintaining the essential economic independence of America, is the supreme task of the contemporary statesman. We need a new science, which we may call nation planning..., maintaining a fairly balanced system of a national economy;” U. S. Department of the Interior, *Proceedings of the Southern Reclamation Conference, Held in Washington, D. C., December 14 and 15, 1927*, 70th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Document No. 45 (Washington, 1928), 44.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

within local communities, while encouraging farmers to consume locally produced goods. To its supporters, reclamation would serve as a way to transform farmers' relationship with the land and to each other, not simply to bring more farmland into cultivation.

These southerners shared many similarities with the original conservationists, but they ultimately faced very different conditions than those that existed in the West, and their approach to reclamation was, as a result, different. They were less concerned with the physical and technical side of conservation and much more concerned with the social side. Hugh MacRae identified these “two divergent ideas about reclamation” as physical engineering and human engineering, and argued that “In the West the need of physical engineering naturally predominates. In the South, to human engineering must be assigned the first place.”⁵⁸ To supporters of southern reclamation, social problems, specifically the “race problem,” must be solved in order to address the issue of sustainable development. In their eyes, the presence of black farmers was not only a hindrance to community organization, but it was also indicative of the deterioration of the countryside. Mead blamed “negroes and unskilled white farmers” for the destruction of the soil, implying that both needed to be replaced.⁵⁹ “The windowless, unpainted, floorless shacks of the

⁵⁸ Hugh MacRae, “To Stop the Back Drift of Faring; to Create Satisfying Rural Life Conditions; to Increase the Purchasing Power of the Farmer—an Objective,” in U. S. Department of the Interior, *Proceedings of the Southern Reclamation Conference, Held in Washington, D. C., December 14 and 15, 1927*, 70th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Document No. 45 (Washington, 1928), 40.

⁵⁹ Although they were subtle in their use of language to blame black farmers for the destruction of the soil, it is nevertheless evident in the following passage: “The land is now cultivated by negroes, living in miserable cabins, with income so small that the more intelligent and enterprising are leaving. The only white people are the hired overseers. Growing cotton with little fertilizer and less livestock has depleted soil fertility and caused some of the land to be given over to weeds and brush. Unless something is done to improve farming methods and living conditions, a continuous decadence is inevitable.” U. S. Department of the Interior, *Proceedings of the Southern Reclamation Conference, Held in Washington, D. C., December 14 and 15, 1927*, 70th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Document No. 45 (Washington, 1928), V.

Negro renters and laborers must be replaced by comfortable [white?] homes,” he wrote.⁶⁰ In addition to bolstering the white population on the land and strengthening segregation, colonization was also a way to prevent social unrest. “If this Nation does not plan and succeed in creating happy families on the land, it will but follow the history of every nation in the world which has failed to do that,” MacRae told the Senate Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation.⁶¹ Southern colonization, therefore, was the outgrowth of a philosophy aimed at sustainable development but colored by race prejudice and a general distrust of the masses. It was an intellectual recipe that proved popular with many prominent southern journalists and lawmakers, but despite favorable reports from House and Senate committees, the colonization bills failed to pass Congress.

Historians have tended to frame the conservation movement as a clash between preservationists and utilitarians involving partisans whose philosophy remained relatively consistent for decades. Recently, Paul Sutter has challenged the continuity argument from the preservationist side, and the campaign for southern reclamation reveals that the utilitarians experienced a similar philosophical schism after World War I. The cause of southern reclamation failed, in part, because utilitarian sentiment toward conservation and agricultural reform had drifted further away from the original vision of the Country Life conservationists and had come to embrace the urban-industrial trends of the 1920s. Proponents of agricultural reform, led by Calvin Coolidge’s Secretary of Agriculture William Jardine, vigorously opposed the reclamation of new agricultural areas. Despite claims by conservationists that southern reclamation would not contribute substantially to

⁶⁰ Mead, “Pygmies of the Earth: a Plea for Rural Reconstruction in the South.”

⁶¹ U.S. Senate, Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation, *Creation of Organized Rural Communities to Demonstration Methods of Reclamation and Benefits of Planned Rural Development, Hearings on S.B. 2015, 70th Cong., 1st Sess.,* (Washington, 1928), 26.

the nation's agricultural production, Jardine maintained that bringing additional lands under the plow would have "serious consequences for American agriculture."⁶² Reclamation would only add to the agricultural surpluses and drive prices down further.⁶³ Furthermore, he added, "group colonization, especially under Government auspices, is an experiment of doubtful promise. The history of such experiments is marked by numerous failures and but few outstanding successes." He reserved harsh criticism for the southern proponents of reclamation: "It is difficult to escape the impression that it is one of a series of measures in the past decade fostered by large, land-owning interests in the South, which desire Federal financial aid in creating a market for their holdings."⁶⁴

After having once been among the vanguard of the movement when Gifford Pinchot headed the U.S. Forest Service, the USDA had adopted a more hands-off approach in the 1920s, reflecting the nation's laissez-faire mood. Government, according to the conservatives Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, had less of a role to play in regulating the consumption of natural resources. Though it did not abandon conservationist principles, the USDA, beginning in 1920, instead promoted cooperation between federal, state, and private entities to ensure more efficient consumption of the nation's forest reserves. To the great dismay of Pinchot and other original conservationists, the federal government relaxed its regulatory function.⁶⁵ The ultimate

⁶² W.M. Jardine to Charles McNary, 4 February 1928, in *Ibid*, 40; for a more in-depth investigation on the impacts of southern reclamation on agricultural surpluses

⁶³ for a more in-depth investigation on the impacts of southern reclamation on agricultural surpluses, see Millard Peck, "Reclamation Projects and Their Relation to Agricultural Depression," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 143, Farm Relief (Mar., 1929), 177-185.

⁶⁴ W.M. Jardine to Charles McNary, 4 February 1928, in U.S. Senate, Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation, *Creation of Organized Rural Communities to Demonstration Methods of Reclamation and Benefits of Planned Rural Development, Hearings on S.B. 2015, 70th Cong., 1st Sess.*, (Washington, 1928), 40.

⁶⁵ For a good discussion of U.S. Forest Service policy in the 1920s, see Swain, *Federal Conservation Policy*, 9-29.

goal of Pinchot's conservation policy had been to preserve the nation's resources for use by small landowners, believing them to be the best stewards of the land. The power of the federal government, he believed, was the only force strong enough to act on behalf of the homesteader, who was in constant danger of being overpowered by large corporations.⁶⁶ However, Jardine's U.S. Forest Service held no such pretensions. Federal policy, Jardine stated, "should take the form of investigation and helpful direction to private enterprise, supplemented in some measure by Federal and State acquisition of forest lands."⁶⁷ Under Jardine and his successors, the USDA became the biggest hurdle in the way of the cause of southern reclamation.

The Interior Department and the Bureau of Reclamation also underwent a similar change of heart following passage of the Fact Finder's Act. Even while it was trying to lift the southern reclamation program off the ground, the Bureau was working to bolster the position of large-scale corporations in the West.⁶⁸ Powerful forces in Congress, as well as the Cabinet, succeeded in redirecting the energies of the Bureau to large-scale development projects, specifically Boulder Dam and the Columbia Basin. As Donald Swain has pointed out, by 1933, the two projects had become the new *raison d'être* for the Bureau, and they had come to symbolize to many the triumph of conservation over the arid regions of the West. But these projects were a far cry from the initial reclamation projects of Frederick Newell. There was no attempt to provide for widespread farm ownership or the development of democratic communities. Instead, Boulder Dam was

⁶⁶ For Pinchot's views on conservation policy and the homesteader, see Gifford Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation* (New York: Doubleday, Page, & Co., 1910), 12-13.

⁶⁷ William Jardine, "Report of the Secretary of Agriculture, 1927," in U.S. Senate, Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation, *Creation of Organized Rural Communities to Demonstration Methods of Reclamation and Benefits of Planned Rural Development, Hearings on S.B. 2015, 70th Cong., 1st Sess.*, (Washington, 1928), 46.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 189-233.

completed largely for the benefit of agribusiness in California's Imperial Valley as a symbol of the industrial capacity of the United States. The large-scale farms in southern California, with the help of increasing numbers of Mexican and Asian immigrants and greatly improved infrastructure, were able to sell crops across the country at prices that put many of the nation's farmers out of business. It is, perhaps, ironic that at the same time the Bureau of Reclamation was attempting to put southern agriculture on a sound footing, it was working to undermine that attempt in southern California.⁶⁹

Above all, the southern reclamation program was thwarted by a new view of conservation, rapidly gaining steam in the wake of World War I, that had little to do with the conservation vision of the Roosevelt progressives. Reflecting the demographic shifts of the previous decades, a new urban-oriented view of conservation was beginning to supplant the pre-war emphasis on rural life. Rather than seeing conservation as the means by which more Americans could secure a livelihood from the land, the new view of conservation emphasized a more recreational relationship with the land. In 1924, President Coolidge initiated the first National Conference on Outdoor Recreation as a way to promote the wholesome use of leisure time on the nation's public lands. Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover told the conference, "We have hitherto directed most of our national activities to the consideration of what we do in the hours of labor and too little to the hours of recreation and here it seems to me lies the purpose of this body. It can [make] a great contribution to the physical, moral, and spiritual growth of the American people."⁷⁰ This emphasis on outdoor recreation began to reshape the

⁶⁹ For a discussion on the policy of the Bureau of Reclamation regarding the Boulder Dam project and the Columbia Basin project, see Swain, *Federal Conservation Policy, 1921-1933*, 88-85.

⁷⁰ National Conference on Outdoor Recreation, *Proceedings of the Meeting of the Advisory Council of the National Conference on Outdoor Recreation Held in the Assembly Hall of the American Red Cross*

concept of conservation to a point in which the two terms were interchangeable. As one of its proponents described the conference, “Obviously and naturally, the primary consideration was Conservation. There can be no outdoor recreation without forest cover, without streams of unpolluted water, without marshland areas through which the waters find their way to the sea.”⁷¹ The new concept of conservation did not emphasize sustainable development. Instead, it came to be increasingly associated with the preservation of fish, wildlife, and natural beauty, and ensuring that every American could find adequate recreational outlets in the public domain. Within the Interior Department, the National Park Service, under the direction of Stephen Mather, gained power and influence as the influence of the Bureau of Reclamation waned.⁷²

Proponents of the new conservation referred to their mission as “human conservation,” and although it seemed a far cry from the “man-conservation” promoted by Hugh MacRae, there was one significant similarity. Both the Pinchot conservationists, with whom MacRae associated, and the new Hoover conservationists believed that contact with nature was an essential human need. Whereas Hoover promoted the use of leisure time to secure that need, Pinchot and MacRae sought ways for people to work on the land. The two interpretations of conservation were often at odds with each other, and by the end of the 1920s, the Hoover conservationists had been largely triumphant. The cause of southern reclamation ran up against a new vision for swamplands and marshlands as breeding grounds for waterfowl that sportsmen needed to

Building, Washington, D.C., December 11-12, 1924, 68th Cong., 2d Sess., Senate Doc. No. 229 (Washington: 1925), 5.

⁷¹ “Human Conservation,” *Outlook*, 4 June 1924.

⁷² For a good discussion on Herbert Hoover’s contributions to conservation, see Carl Krog, “*Organizing the Production of Leisure: Herbert Hoover and the Conservation Movement in the 1920s*,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Spring 1984), 199-218.

hunt. At the 1924 conference, the Committee on Waterway Pollution and Drainage adopted the following resolution. It read, in part:

Whereas, the United States possesses 80,000,000 acres of swamp and overflow land important for equalizing stream run-off by holding rainfall and, in many instances, serving as the breeding grounds of fish and wild life, be it

Resolved, That indiscriminate drainage is to be deplored as a source of conspicuous waste, and that careful investigation should be made in advance of all drainage operations to determine resultant benefits and injuries.⁷³

Thus, the changing views of conservation did not have much room for the colonization bills put forth by MacRae, Mead, and others. After recommending that the bills pass, the Committees on Irrigation and Reclamation received a reality check from the man who had initialized the campaign for southern reclamation. Interior Secretary Hubert Work, who also served on the advisory committee for the National Conference on Outdoor Recreation, wrote a two-sentence letter to the committee, stating bluntly: “the proposed legislation would be in conflict with the financial program of the President. Very truly yours, Hubert Work.”⁷⁴

The cause of southern reclamation promised to fulfill the original vision of the Country Life conservationists, and a group of dedicated reformers, mostly southern and led by MacRae and Mead, carried the torch of Pinchot, Bailey, and Newell into the 1920s. However, in the decade of the “Roaring Twenties,” conservation policy reached a crossroads. More accurately, it had reached decision time at a crossroads that had been looming over the movement since Theodore Roosevelt was at the helm. The road to the left led to a democracy of labor in which those Americans with such inclinations could

⁷³ “Planning for a Generation Ahead,” *Outlook*, 4 June 1924.

⁷⁴ U.S. Senate, Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation, *Creation of Organized Rural Communities to Demonstration Methods of Reclamation and Benefits of Planned Rural Development, Hearings on S.B. 2015, 70th Cong., 1st Sess.,* (Washington, 1928), 8.

theoretically find the economic independence and security that comes with a close relationship with the land. On this, more rural, road, individual wealth would be more limited, as would options for leisure, association, and mobility, but in return, individuals could enjoy the social benefits of a fully functioning community. Moreover, consumption of the Earth's resources would be stabilized. It was a dark, lonely road, as the nation's large businesses had already chosen the other road, and the American workers who might have traveled it were either too poor to light it sufficiently or remained unsold on the route.

The road to the right led to a democracy of leisure in which Americans with such inclinations could find more options for inexpensive and "wholesome" outdoor recreation in their spare time. On this road, Americans could make as much money as they were capable of making and spend it on whatever they deemed necessary, but they would increasingly have to choose between their geographical community and their occupation, and they would largely lose their economic independence and security in the process. The visions for the countryside represented by these two roads could not have been more different, and while one could certainly argue that the former road was not as realistic as the latter, that is a judgment based on hindsight. Furthermore, such an argument is beside the point, as this thesis is solely concerned with the realm of ideas. Indeed, conservation was based heavily on idealism, and there was a window of time during which the federal government had to choose which to follow. After two decades of entertaining both roads, in the 1920s they clearly chose the right fork.

The rural life program of the New Deal in the 1930s reflected that choice. Although Hugh MacRae would finally get his chance to build Farm City as part of

President Franklin Roosevelt's expansive reform smorgasbord, it was not quite what he had hoped. The New Deal's rural life program actually attempted to travel down both roads simultaneously, but in the end, it could only go one route, and it chose the right fork. With the choice of economic efficiency and centralization of power, the New Deal abandoned the Country Life conservationist vision.

CHAPTER 4

THE CHANCE OF FARM CITY: PENDERLEA, SOUTHERN AGRARIANISM, AND THE DECLINE OF THE CO-OPERATIVE COMMUNITY MOVEMENT

In the summer of 1933, Hugh MacRae finally received his chance to build Farm City. With little fanfare and no floor debate, Alabama Senator John Bankhead inserted a two-sentence paragraph into the National Industrial Recovery Act, and by September, Section 208 had called into being one of the most unique agencies of the New Deal, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads. As the Division began planning for the development of dozens of planned communities across the nation, MacRae was named manager of one of them, Penderlea Homesteads. Carved out of the swamplands and cut-over forests of Pender County, North Carolina, Penderlea carried with it MacRae's hopes and dreams of rural life in the South, but his optimism faded amidst the increasing realization that the Division of Subsistence Homesteads was not the engine for rural reform that he had envisioned for so long. Although he would continue to maintain his goals for Penderlea and southern rural life over the course of 1934, he consistently ran up against Interior Department officials who had a different vision for the program.

Furthermore, he found himself directly challenging Interior Secretary Harold Ickes's philosophy over how best to administer the community building program. Eventually, the challenge proved too difficult for the federal government to overcome. Beset by bureaucratic red tape and spiraling construction costs, Penderlea became more of a liability for MacRae, and he resigned his post by the following year, turning his attention to other channels of reform.

Despite the agrarian rhetoric of many of its proponents, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads departed from the Country Life conservationist vision for rural life, as MacRae quickly discovered. It was a product of the Great Depression, and its goal was not to secure the yeomanry but to provide relief for the unemployed. MacRae's struggle with the Interior Department reflects the philosophical distance between remnants of the original Country Life conservation movement and the new conservationists. By 1934, MacRae was one of the few left who continued to push the original conservation line, but his efforts were hampered on one side by a conservation policy that focused largely on forests, multipurpose river development, national parks, and wildlife preservation, and, on the other side, by an agricultural policy that focused on market manipulation and subsidies to the largest producers. Furthermore, the New Deal's rural life program did not emphasize the role of the yeomanry and instead sought to build rural communities largely around industrial development. Hampered by this philosophical shift, the role of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads devolved into one of providing temporary poverty relief. As the message of Liberty Hyde Bailey and the Country Life conservationists dissipated into the new urban reality of American life, many southerners refused to let it die. Led by MacRae, they would continue into the

mid-1930s to push the federal government for a rural life program that embodied the Country Life philosophy.

In many ways, the onset of the Great Depression provided a golden opportunity for proponents of colonization as a means of rural reform. The political situation was more conducive to radical reform efforts stressing the need for cooperation, as Americans began to consider in earnest the need for structural changes to the American economic system. Social conditions also seemed favorable as a new obsession with the land seemed to be taking root. For perhaps the first and only time in American history, the rural-to-urban migration was reversed in 1930, as more Americans moved onto the land than into the cities.¹ Furthermore, some observers testified to the strengthening sense of community among rural residents. “The lack of money made it impossible for the farm population to continue to patronize urban commercialized activities as previously,” Sociologist Bruce Melvin noted in 1932. “Men on the farm seemed to have come to a realization, as never before, that dollars are not an adequate measurement of successful rural life; and they, as well as the women, have increasingly become interested in music, recreation, landscape-planning and planting, and in making the home more comfortable and satisfying.”² Melvin predicted that “some decades hence, 1930 may be regarded as the focal point in a transitory social structure.”³ At least some rural reformers saw a silver lining in the cataclysmic economic collapse.

MacRae must have been excited at the prospect of proving his theories, but he was also aware that the national mood was something entirely different from the Country Life conservationism that had originally fueled his campaign. Such a change in mood

¹ Bruce Melvin, “Rural Life,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 37, No. 6 (May, 1932), 940.

² Ibid.

³ Bruce Melvin, “Rural Life,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 36, No. 6 (May, 1931), 990.

was responsible for bringing the idea of planned rural communities to its height of popularity in Congress, but the attitude toward such a program was not what MacRae had hoped for. Instead of reviving rural life by providing tenants with a path to homeownership, Congress proposed planned communities in order to relieve the cities of their unemployed. In 1932, the so-called Black bills, named after their cosponsor Loring Black, provided the only real committee hearings and floor debates for the program that would largely be implemented by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads in 1933, and those in favor of the bills were not interested in rural reform. One of the bills' ardent supporters, New York City publicist Bernarr McFadden, flatly stated that he wanted to "take people from the bread lines and put them some place where they can earn what they have to eat."⁴ In his testimony, MacRae seemed to have accepted, if reluctantly, the emergency nature of the bills and their goal of urban relief, saying they were necessary "to prevent starvation."⁵ MacRae never mentioned his desire to reform rural life (although he did discuss the appalling condition of southern tenant farmers), and he only half-heartedly mentioned details of his colonization experiments. He was asked to testify largely on the feasibility of placing people with no agricultural background on the land. Perhaps reflecting the realization that his agricultural critics would never allow for his rural reform program, he seemed resolved to promote land settlement as a means of poverty relief. "So far we have been interested in not sacrificing commercial values [at his colonies], but I think we have now reached the point where we must interest ourselves in not sacrificing human values."⁶

⁴ U.S. House Committee on Labor, *Relief of Distress Due to Unemployment, Hearings on H.R. 11055 and H.R. 11056*, 72nd Cong., 1st Sess., April 29, 1932.

⁵ Ibid, 27-28.

⁶ Ibid, 32.

Several schemes for accomplishing such a goal were proposed to the House Committee on Labor in the spring of 1932, but none of them accorded to MacRae's vision. They ranged from trucking the unemployed daily to the countryside to the establishment of part-time suburban farming communities. "I think we are going to have an increase in the number of persons living near to and working in cities, dividing their efforts between cities and farms," Dr. John Black, an agricultural economist, told the committee.⁷ MacRae, however, denounced such an idea as a "fallacy." "One who works successfully in a factory can not farm also satisfactorily," he retorted."⁸ Farming could either be made to pay for people with limited means, or those people could find wage work in industry, he maintained, but they could not do both.

Indeed, the mood in the committee hearings was much different than for the earlier bills for land settlement in the South. They contained no discussion of conservation, of Country Life, or of any other philosophical element of land settlement. Elwood Mead was conspicuously absent from the hearings, sending his assistant instead to testify for the Bureau of Reclamation on the demand for farms from urban people. Furthermore, one of the key witnesses, Haveland Lund, founder of the National Forward to the Land League, delivered a blistering attack on the conservationists, including Gifford Pinchot and Elwood Mead, calling them socialists and communists who were intent on the "nationalization of our land."⁹ Incidentally, in her McCarthyesque testimony, she also claimed that "there are several socialists holding important positions in our Government bureaus."¹⁰ While MacRae escaped much of her criticism, he must

⁷ Ibid, 7.

⁸ Ibid, 29.

⁹ Ibid, 89.

¹⁰ Ibid, 87.

have felt out of place in the committee hearings. The Black bills failed to pass, but a change in administration provided the impetus that many of the bills' supporters needed.

The Division of Subsistence Homesteads was a mixed blessing for MacRae and other rural reformers. On the surface, section 208 seemed to embrace the objective of the Black bills in aiding the urban unemployed, but due to its vague and ambiguous language, MacRae found room to push his rural reform agenda. Section 208 allocated \$25 million for the president to "provide for aiding the redistribution of the overbalance of population in industrial centers" through "such agencies as he may establish and under such regulations as he may make."¹¹ President Roosevelt gave the job to Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, who sought out the advice of a number of men, including MacRae and Mead, on the best strategy to pursue. While he ultimately agreed with the colonization experts that group settlement was the best strategy for relocating Americans on the land, Ickes decided not to place either man in charge of the program. Reflecting a change in policy toward land settlement, he created an entirely new Division of Subsistence Homesteads and named Milburn L. Wilson, a Montana farmer-turned-bureaucrat, as its director. Meanwhile Mead's Bureau of Reclamation continued to report declining revenues as it sank into obsolescence.¹²

"M. L.," as Wilson was called by those who knew him, seemed willing to try anything to transform rural and suburban life across the country. Under his leadership, the Division initially promised much more than unemployment relief. In Wilson's eyes, the subsistence homesteads program was "the germ for the development of a new way of

¹¹ An Act to Encourage National Industrial Recovery, to Foster Fair Competition, and to Provide for the Construction of Certain Using Public Works, and for Other Purposes, Sec. 208, Our Documents Project, <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=66&page=transcript> [accessed April 12, 2011].

¹² "Ickes Shows Drift Back to the Land," *New York Times*, 19 December 1933.

life.”¹³ Hoping Americans would “reestablish contact with the soil,” he saw the objective of the Division as “sampling the possibilities of long-term planning” by confronting the “various regional problems,” including the “recreation of rural life in the Southeast.”¹⁴ Indeed, Both Wilson and Ickes saw the program as the solution to the volatile population shifts that had occurred over the previous few decades. Up through the 1920s, people flocked to opportunities in the cities, but at the outset of the Great Depression, the cityward flow “has automatically reversed itself.”¹⁵ The working classes were caught in a perpetual vise between the consolidation of agriculture on one hand and the contractions of the industrial economy on the other, and they hoped the subsistence homesteads program would create a new social organization based on subsistence agriculture and part-time industrial work that was insulated from the swings in the national economy. Unemployed urban workers comprised only one of the groups Wilson hoped to help under section 208. He also targeted stranded rural industrial workers and stranded farmers.

Wilson had a vision for community life very similar to MacRae’s and was sympathetic to the idea of Farm City. Characterizing it as a “revolt against the crass materialism and the shallowness of the jazz age,” Wilson described the new way of life proposed by the Division as “a new form of community living made possible by modern industrial and technological development, as well as by the growth of a more rational approach to questions of land utilization.”¹⁶ It was the type of constructive solution to

¹³ Wilson, “A New Land Use Program: The Place of Subsistence Homesteads,” *The Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Feb., 1934), 12.

¹⁴ M. L. Wilson, “A New Land-Use Program: The Place of Subsistence Homesteads,” *The Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Feb., 1934), 2.

¹⁵ M. L. Wilson, “Government Testing Value of Subsistence Homesteads,” *New York Times*, 11 Feb., 1934.

¹⁶ M. L. Wilson, “The Place of Subsistence Homesteads in Our National Economy,” *Journal of Farm Economics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Jan., 1934), 81; Wilson, “A New Land Use Program: The Place of Subsistence

modern life that MacRae had been pushing for decades. Having impressed Wilson with his colonization experiments, MacRae easily secured a \$1 million loan from the Division, created Penderlea Homesteads Incorporated in December, and set up a Board of Directors that included North Carolina sociologist Carl C. Taylor and renowned city planner John Nolen, two of the early backers of Farm City. Under the direction of MacRae, Nolen designed Penderlea along lines similar to Farm City, making it the most carefully planned of all the subsistence homesteads communities.¹⁷ On 4,550 acres of land in Pender County purchased from MacRae, some 300 families would be settled on ten-acre plots, arranged around a demonstration farm and a community center that included a school building, auditorium, gymnasium, community club house, co-op store, and a home for teachers.¹⁸ Indeed, Penderlea was the ultimate realization of Farm City.

Despite their similar goals and philosophy regarding modern life, however, Wilson and MacRae's visions for the countryside were fundamentally different. Wilson adapted the community idea to the industrial age, arguing that wage work was essential to providing workers with purchasing power, but MacRae maintained that part-time farming was simply not practical, and he continued to insist that rural life remain dependent on agriculture and that agriculture must be reformed. Despite Wilson's plea for stranded farmers on sub-marginal lands to be reorganized, the Department of the Interior was primarily interested in the decentralization of industry. In their view, rural and suburban life should not be wholly dependent on agriculture. Concerned about stepping on the toes

Homesteads in Our National Economy," *The Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Feb., 1934), 12.

¹⁷ By far the best history of Penderlea and the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, is Paul Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: the New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), 277-298.

¹⁸ Muriel Wolff, "Penderlea," Fol. 806, Federal Writers Project Archives, 1936-1940, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

of the agricultural interests who spurned government-aided competition and were wary of a growing farm surplus, Wilson and the Interior Department publicly argued that food production in these communities would be for subsistence only. In the end, afraid of upsetting the fragile agricultural markets, the Division created only two full-time farming communities, and Penderlea held the most promise, but over the course of 1934, the rift between MacRae and Ickes would grow ever wider, and the future of Farm City hung in the balance.¹⁹

By May, 1934, the already tense relationship between MacRae and Ickes entered a new phase. Progress at Penderlea had been steady. In five months, MacRae had overseen the construction of a transient labor camp to prepare the grounds for the permanent settlement, a demonstration farm, sixteen miles of roads, and ten frame houses, all amounting to \$325,000 of the \$1 million loan.²⁰ MacRae insisted that the project was proceeding according to schedule, but Ickes had other ideas. Citing higher-than-expected costs and slow progress on many of the projects, Ickes decided in May to federalize the entire subsistence homesteads program, taking most of the decision-making away from local managers like MacRae and placing it in the hands of the Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation. Faced with such a change in policy, M. L. Wilson resigned and returned to the Department of Agriculture, and MacRae grew indignant. Having been philosophically opposed to government control from the beginning, MacRae chafed at the administrative changes. He protested to his superiors throughout the remainder of the year. “The success of a rural community is dependent upon a

¹⁹ For Wilson’s views on agriculture and the decentralization of industry and evidence that decentralization was his ultimate aim, see Wilson, “Decentralization of Industry in the New Deal,” *Social Forces*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (May, 1935), 588-598.

²⁰ Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 282.

continuous and unending number of decisions made promptly and with judgment based on precedent,” he wrote to the new General Manager of the Division, Charles Pynchon.²¹ The transfer of control to distant bureaucrats, he argued, had already led to “costly delay, discouragement and finally the hopeless confusion which precedes failure.”²² The policy change was MacRae’s ultimate nightmare. While he believed government financing was essential, he maintained that successful community building could not be guided from Washington.²³

Despite the fact that the entire program had been federalized, MacRae took the policy change personally, believing that Ickes’s decision threatened his community more than any others.²⁴ He saw Penderlea as something totally different than what the Division of Subsistence Homesteads envisioned for the program. “A rural community, dependent basically on crop production, marketing and cooperation, is quite different from Subsistence Homesteads—the support of which comes through close connection with industry,” he wrote to Ickes. “While the Subsistence Homestead finds it essential only to carry over periods between payrolls, a Rural Community must—in order to survive—adapt itself not only to seasons but to lengthy periods...To avoid wreckage it must stay in gear with markets as well as with natural and social conditions.”²⁵ In other words, rural communities based on agriculture were more intimately tied to the land and

²¹ MacRae to Charles Pynchon, 22 December 1934, MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

²² “Resume and Condensation of Correspondence Between Officials of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads and Hugh MacRae, Project Managers and Others from December 1933 to November 1934,” MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N. C.

²³ For a good analysis of MacRae and Ickes ideological battle, see Marcia Synnott, “Hugh MacRae, Penderlea, and the Farm Communities Movement,” *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* (Columbia: South Carolina Historical Association, 1987).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Hugh MacRae, “Memorandum for the Secretary of the Interior, Relating to the Successful Development of Penderlea As Initiating a Rural Life Program,” MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

to markets and, therefore, demanded an entirely different method of governance.

Whereas centralized authority might be permissible for industrial communities, it was inexcusable for farming communities in which decisions had to be made based on the seasons, conditions of the land, weather, and other local factors. MacRae felt that he had a personal authorization from President Roosevelt to “build a rural community which would revolutionize rural life,” and he criticized Ickes’s decision for threatening the very nature of rural reform.²⁶

In November, 1934, the philosophical clash between MacRae and the Interior Department became clearer when the Solicitor for the department ruled that section 208 was intended to provide relief to industrial workers, not to resettled farmers.²⁷ Although this did not end the Penderlea project, it clearly revealed the priorities of the Department. MacRae wrote to Ickes, stating that “unless there is a change in managing authority the project may safely be written off as a failure.”²⁸ He requested either a return to local control or a transfer of authority of the rural life program to the Bureau of Reclamation “thus receiving the benefit of the experience and unquestioned ability of its chief [Mead].”²⁹ Instead, Ickes initiated an investigation of Penderlea, which culminated in an indictment of MacRae’s judgment, citing poor choice of soil, poor choice of settlers, and farms that were too small. Ickes delayed the completion of Penderlea while a new design for the settlement was completed. Instead of 300 ten-acre farms, Penderlea would contain 150 farms of approximately twenty acres.³⁰ MacRae lambasted the conclusions,

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 128.

²⁸ MacRae to Harold Ickes, 19 November 1934, MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N. C.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 280-290.

calling the investigation “a smokescreen for incompetence.”³¹ Amidst this controversy, MacRae resigned as manager of Penderlea.

MacRae’s resignation from the Interior Department did not end his reform efforts. “I am anxious to continue this work until it bears worthwhile fruit beyond the point of demonstration,” he told Franklin P. Graham, president of the University of North Carolina, in September, 1935.³² As he pushed his reform program, MacRae’s rhetoric, as well as that of his southern allies, took on an increasingly sectional tone. Prior to the onset of the Great Depression, they avoided sectional language, calling for the upbuilding of southern agriculture without criticizing the rest of the nation, but that began to change as the affects of the agricultural depression grew more severe. David R. Coker, an early supporter of Farm City and a close personal friend of MacRae’s, blamed southern rural poverty on “the treatment the South has received at the hands of the nation.”³³ MacRae similarly cited “excessive exploitation from the outside.”³⁴ In 1930, MacRae and Coker led a group of southern academics, politicians, and other reformers in the formation of the Southeastern Council in Atlanta with the expressed purpose of facilitating the “quick mobilization of the recognized leadership, men and women, throughout the Southeastern States....for the mutual protection of all economic interests which relate to their well being.”³⁵ Calling the South “a land of natural abundance,” these southern leaders targeted three primary problems facing the South: an adverse trade balance with the rest

³¹ MacRae to David R. Coker, 9 April 1935, MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

³² MacRae to Franklin P. Graham, 2 September 1935, Franklin P. Graham Papers, North Carolina Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

³³ David R. Coker, “Memorandum: Referring to ‘Tightening the Cotton Belt’ Appearing in Harpers’ Magazine for Feb. 1934,” MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N. C.

³⁴ “June 6, 1934, Remember the Day,” MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

³⁵ MacRae to A. F. Carter, 5 July 1932, MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N. C.

of the nation, an obsolete system of agriculture based on tenancy and single-crop farming, and the absence of a southwide forest conservation program.³⁶ To address these problems, the Southeastern Council proposed more farm colonies like Penderlea under local control, educational reforms, a forest conservation program, an inventory of all the natural resources in the region, and a “Buy Southern” campaign to induce southerners to “produce, buy, and consume our own products.”³⁷ It was a formula designed to put the South on a more self-sufficient and, in their minds, sustainable path of development based on the preservation of the yeomanry.

In many ways, their vision for the South was very similar to the one proposed by the original Country Life conservationists for the entire nation. Indeed, MacRae applied to the South the conservationist principle that the nation needed to live within its borders and develop its resources more sustainably. Moreover, they all believed that a healthy rural life was essential to a healthy economic development. Echoing the conservation agrarianism of the early Country Lifers, MacRae and other members of the Southeastern Council believed that rural life was “the base of the South’s economic structure and therefore of its civilization.”³⁸ Like Roosevelt, they did not advocate a wholesale return to agriculture or an abandonment of industrial development but, rather, a balanced economic growth based on the theory that rural life underpins broader economic and social health. Therefore, it must be more satisfying and independent.

³⁶ Ibid; “June 6, 1934, Remember the Day,” MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

³⁷ Ibid; “Forestry Program for the Southeastern States,” *Science*, New Series, Vol. 77, No. 1985 (Jan. 13, 1933), 43-44.

³⁸ MacRae to Franklin P. Graham, 18 March 1935, Franklin P. Graham Papers, North Carolina Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

As MacRae continued to push for his rural reform program, he found that he had few allies in the federal government outside of the South. The Country Life conservationism that had lent support to his earlier efforts had been largely abandoned by the national conservationists, leaving him to solicit support from southern intellectuals whose agrarian sentiment was deeply rooted in regional identity. Because MacRae and his most ardent southern supporters were not writers, the reasons why this group turned so hard toward economic sectionalism remains somewhat unclear, but it is reasonable to assume that they followed an intellectual path similar to other contemporary southern thinkers. In his intellectual history of the South's transition to Modernist thought, Daniel Singal has identified the 1920s as a pivotal decade in the eroding of the New South ideology. Southern thought had been stifled by the powerful myth of the New South, blinding southerners to the harsh realities of southern life and history, but following World War I, a new generation of southerners began a forceful and empirical examination of the South with all its flaws and fallacies. As MacRae had done prior to World War I, these thinkers arrived at the conclusion that industrialization and economic development alone could not solve the region's social problems, and they began to consider new ways to rebuild the South.³⁹ Amidst this southern renaissance, the idea of Farm City took on renewed significance.

In many ways, MacRae seemed to be the intellectual peer of the Southern Agrarians. Like MacRae and the Country Life conservationists, these southern white men, mostly academics associated with Vanderbilt University, envisioned a South dominated by white yeomen who would maintain traditional community values and a

³⁹ See Daniel Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), xi-377.

close connection to nature.⁴⁰ In 1930, twelve of them published *I'll Take My Stand*, in which they promoted an economic sectionalism that was very similar to MacRae's. They divided American society along sectional lines, the agrarian South versus the industrial North, and they championed a southern agrarian revival to establish the South as a bulwark against northern industrialism.⁴¹ As Singal has argued, many of the Agrarians had come to identify so strongly with the South not because they bought into the myths perpetuated by the New South Creed nor because they held conservative, anti-modern views, but because their Modernist sensibility led them to see the South as a regional base from which to attack the evils of urban industrialism.⁴² A powerful symbol of resistance to change, the South provided an alternative identity to industrial capitalism that was rooted in place and stabilized over time, and it is likely that MacRae, Coker, and other southern remnants of the Country Life conservationists turned toward sectionalism for similar reasons. For them, the South could provide a regional check against the cultural and economic waste of urban industrialism. Balanced economic development now required the South to reassert its agrarian identity.

⁴⁰ It must be noted that the southern agrarians certainly did not consider themselves conservationists in the contemporary association of the term with the federal government. They did not use the term "conservation" to describe any of their beliefs, but this is probably due to the fact that these men were largely poets and philosophers, not politicians. As so many critics have pointed out, they were not concerned with formulating a policy to remedy the situation. Rather, their goal seems to have been to convince southerners not to abandon their agrarian ideals, and the language they used was very similar, if much more poetic, to that of MacRae, Coker, and other members of the Southeastern Council. Indeed, they too were the inheritors of Country Life conservationism.

⁴¹ James C. Cobb has argued that the southern agrarians were "less intent on defending agrarianism or even deriding industrialism than on inciting their fellow white southerners to rise in revolt against what they saw as the ongoing New South effort to northernize their economy and society and thereby destroy their regional identity," Cobb, *Away Down South, A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 116.

⁴² See Singal, *The War Within*, 199-260.

Perhaps the biggest evil that the Agrarians saw in industrialism, as Louis Rubin has argued, was that it was “based on a false attitude toward the natural world.”⁴³ Characterizing industrialism as the “exploiter of nature,” these southerners believed that an agrarian revival would bring American society back into a sustainable balance, economically and socially, with the Earth. John Crowe Ransom, for one, condemned the pioneering spirit that led to economic expansionism, believing that “It seems wiser to be moderate in our expectations of nature, and respectful; and out of so simple a thing as respect for the physical earth and its teeming life comes a primary joy.”⁴⁴ Indeed, at times, the agrarian manifesto reads like Bailey’s *Holy Earth*. Reflecting the same spiritual attachment to the soil, they defined “religion” as “the sense of our role as creatures within [nature],” and they believed only an agrarian society could preserve that sense.⁴⁵ They attacked the influence of industrialism on the “God of nature,” lamenting that “the philosophical understanding ordinarily carried in the religious experience is not there for us to have.”⁴⁶ Although they did not explicitly link this outlook on nature to the same global worldview of resource development that many Country Life conservationists did, many of them nevertheless maintained an implicit argument that, as Ransom put it, “nature wears out man before man can wear out nature.”⁴⁷ In farming, they ultimately believed, lies the sustainability of the human race. It was a philosophy to which MacRae certainly subscribed.

⁴³ Louis Rubin, Jr., “The Concept of Nature in Modern Southern Poetry,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring, 1957), 64.

⁴⁴ John Crowe Ransom, “Reconstructed but Unregenerate,” *I’ll Take My Stand*, 9.

⁴⁵ Donald Davidson, John Gould Fletcher, Henry Blue Kline, Lyle H. Lanier, Andrew Nelson Lytle, Herman Clarence Nixon, Frank Lawrence Owsley, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, John Donald Wade, Robert Penn Warren, Stark Young, “Introduction: A Statement of Principles,” *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006, originally published in 1930), xlv.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Like the Country Life conservationists before them, the Southern Agrarians forcefully attacked the prevailing view of progress for progress' sake. Ransom, for example, called industrialism "a program under which men, using the latest scientific paraphernalia, sacrifice comfort, leisure, and the enjoyment of life to win Pyrrhic victories from nature at points of no strategic importance."⁴⁸ Echoing community organizers like E. C. Lindeman, Lyle Lanier believed the effects of industrial progress was "personal isolation" and community disorganization, and he hoped that the concept of progress would be scrapped so that "real association," such as that found "in the agrarian community and in the villages and towns which are its adjuncts" could be strengthened.⁴⁹ Lanier argued that this outlook was not backward-looking or regressive. Rather, it is "the definition of a concrete social aim," and it can only be reached, he said, by "far-sighted 'social engineering.'"⁵⁰

Along with MacRae and Coker, the Southern Agrarians pushed the Country Life conservationist philosophy further toward a direct challenge to American habits of consumption. Calling consumerism "the grand end which justifies the evil of modern labor," the Agrarians put forth a producerist philosophy that emphasized the dignity of labor and the need for more moderate consumption.⁵¹ "Farmers have been kept in poverty, their farms have been heavily mortgaged and eventually deserted, through the purchase of needless luxuries and expensive machinery for which the advertising of industrialists has created a sense of need," Lanier wrote.⁵² Similarly, MacRae and the Southeastern Council took this notion a step further toward formulating a policy that

⁴⁸ Ibid, 15.

⁴⁹ Lyle Lanier, "A Critique of the Philosophy of Progress," *I'll Take My Stand*, 146.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Davidson et al, "Introduction: a Statement of Principles," *I'll Take My Stand*, xlv.

⁵² Lanier, 153.

would channel the consuming power of the South in order to support local farms and manufactories. It is necessary, said David R. Coker, “to teach our people to be thrifty and self-sustaining and to deny themselves luxuries or non-necessities, the indulgence in which is today largely responsible for keeping our section in relative poverty.”⁵³ The Southern Agrarians could not have agreed more. While it is unclear the extent to which the Southern Agrarians influenced the thinking of MacRae, it is clear that by the early 1930s, they had reached similar conclusions of modern life and southern conditions. Understanding the philosophy of the southern agrarians, moreover, can help illuminate the reasoning behind MacRae’s transition from New South advocate to sectional agrarian.

Despite their similarities, MacRae and the Southern Agrarians differed in one key respect. *I’ll Take My Stand* contains no hint of support for the idea of Farm City. This is likely due to the fact that the Agrarians were less interested in formulating a policy for an agrarian revival than they were in hashing out the philosophical discrepancies between their Modernist sensibilities and their distaste for industrial capitalism. Because of this ambivalence about modernity, Singal asserts that many of the Southern Agrarians were transitional figures in the intellectual shift from Victorian to Modernist thought. They were able to see through the myths of the New South without wholly escaping the influence of Victorian moralism. As a result, they were often criticized, by contemporaries and historians alike, as being reactionary and overly idealistic. Indeed, it would take a new generation of southern thinkers to bring Modernist thought to the South and the idea of Farm City to the forefront of southern intellectual debate.

⁵³ David R. Coker to MacRae, 18 October 1934, MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N. C.

Herman Clarence Nixon of northern Alabama, one of the more liberal members of the Vanderbilt Agrarians, may have been reactionary in 1930. His essay in *I'll Take My Stand*, "Whither Southern Economy?," chronicled the growth of industrialism in the South and implored his fellow southerners to "subordinate industrial processes to the status of slaves," but he did not offer any kind specific strategy or plan of reform.⁵⁴ By the mid-1930s, however, Nixon began to develop one. "It is essential," he wrote in 1938, summarizing his new vision, "to provide by public effort for social and economic cooperation among small farmers, to make possible a better system of farm villages."⁵⁵ The turning point came in 1934 when he, along with William T. Couch, the fiery publisher of the University of North Carolina Press, undertook a tour of planned farm villages in the South, which culminated in a stay with Hugh MacRae. Like virtually every visitor prior, Nixon was impressed by the results he saw at MacRae's older colonies, calling it a "wholesome transformation of the countryside."⁵⁶ "It is interesting to visit them and to contrast them with the planless life of Southern farm tenants," he wrote. "The community needs of the South require that the timid experiments of the government should yield to a bold policy of farm village development."⁵⁷ According to his biographer, this study of farm and village life in the South, "more than any other experience[,]. . .made Nixon a cooperative agrarian."⁵⁸

After 1934, Nixon largely abandoned both his sectionalism and his defense of individualism and championed a type of community organization that had been preached

⁵⁴ Herman Clarence Nixon, "Whither Southern Economy?" *I'll Take My Stand*, 176, 200.

⁵⁵ Herman Clarence Nixon, *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938), 61.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Sarah Newman Shouse, *Hillbilly Realist: Herman Clarence Nixon of Possum Trot* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 76-78.

⁵⁷ Nixon, *Forty Acres and Steel Mules*, 66-67, 68.

⁵⁸ Shouse, *Hillbilly Realist*, 78.

by the Country Lifers following World War I.⁵⁹ Distinguishing himself from many of the Southern Agrarians, he became more critical of rural life in the South, which “is often dull because it is unorganized and isolated.”⁶⁰ Increased social and economic cooperation between relatively equal smallholders was the key to securing not only a better democracy in the South but also a more sustainable economic system. This philosophical shift naturally led him to put more faith in planning. Calling rural life under competitive capitalism “a planless waste of physical and human resources,” he often told his classes that “the South must plan or perish.”⁶¹ Planning for more self-sufficient communities, he asserted, “would facilitate a program of more intensive farming, of balanced farming, and of balance between farming and industrial pursuits, including handicrafts. It would permit more people to live and to live well in the South. It would permit the South to avoid a population crisis, which seems to be upon us.”⁶² Nixon’s experience at MacRae’s planned community undoubtedly helped push him towards the rhetoric of the Country Life conservationists.

The tour of planned southern communities in the summer of 1934 must have also left a similar impression on W. T. Couch. In a follow-up article to his edited volume, *Culture in the South*, Couch, like Nixon, called the government’s subsistence homestead program “timid” and boldly stated that “there ought to be a definite plan for the establishment of four or five thousand villages of one hundred to three hundred farm families within the next five years.”⁶³ Couch, however, went further than Nixon in

⁵⁹ Ibid, 77-79.

⁶⁰ Nixon, *Forty Acres and Steel Mules*, 62.

⁶¹ Herman Clarence Nixon, *Possum Trot, Rural Community, South* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), 158, 171.

⁶² Nixon, *Forty Acres and Steel Mules*, 70.

⁶³ W. T. Couch, “An Agrarian Programme for the South,” *The American Review*, Vol. 3 (Apr.-Oct., 1934), 322.

formulating an agrarian utopia in his mind. Couch envisioned a rural South comprised of self-sufficient villages complete with community centers, libraries, movie halls, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, tennis and basketball courts, and playgrounds. Each farmer in the village would specialize in producing a few certain goods and therefore be able to trade with his neighbors to obtain other farm products, thereby “establishing the village on such a basis that the dominance of a competitive money economy would be impossible.”⁶⁴ The village itself would be owned by a farmers’ cooperative, and business proprietorship in the village would be granted to villagers based on merit, not wealth. Echoing the rural segregationism of Clarence Poe, Couch believed that “the Negro...should have his own villages and his own farms, and, as with the whites, they should either be given to him by the government, or an arrangement should be made under which he could buy and pay for them in ten or fifteen years.”⁶⁵

In 1935, Couch published *Agrarianism, a Program for Farmers* by Troy J. Cauley, a Georgia Tech professor and a late-comer to the Agrarian movement. In his book, Cauley attempted to formulate a strategy for restoring an agrarian society. Long on criticism of capitalism and communism and short on policy specifics, he did offer an upbeat but cautious appraisal of the government’s subsistence homesteads program, calling the idea of government-planned farm villages “of considerable merit from the standpoint to the restoration of a general agrarian economy.”⁶⁶ However, he did emphasize the experimental nature of the program and suggested that the jury was still out. With the arrival of Modernist thought, the idea of planned farm villages had

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 325.

⁶⁶ Troy J. Cauley, *Agrarianism, a Program for Farmers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 209.

assumed a new level of popularity among southern intellectuals, and after his dismissal from the Interior Department, Hugh MacRae sought to build on that popularity.

In January of 1935, MacRae appealed to President Roosevelt to consider the Southeastern Council's plan for rural reform. Section 208 of the National Industrial Recovery Act, he claimed in a telegram to the President's secretary, "does not delegate to the President broad enough powers to permit of a successful program," and he proposed a new plan that would "embody some of the findings of the Theodore Roosevelt Rural [sic] Life Commission," as well as the findings of the report on Reclamation and Rural Development in the South from 1926. Unable to grab Roosevelt's ear, MacRae, Coker, and other members of the Council wrote letters to southern leaders in the federal government, including Commerce Secretary Daniel Roper, who had served as special adviser for Reclamation and Rural Development in the South in 1926, and Secretary of State Cordell Hull, as well as a number of southern congressmen, asking them to press the President for a hearing. "We are fighting to save a civilization," he told them.⁶⁷

In March, some seventeen southern congressmen attended the Southeastern Council's Conference on Rural Life in Washington to discuss solutions to the South's rural economic woes. They largely agreed with MacRae's assessments of both Ickes and section 208, calling them inadequate to administer a southern rural life program. Many attendees wanted to present the President with a concrete plan similar to that of MacRae's, but at least one congressman believed that the pending Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Bill was the best way to proceed. Co-sponsored by Alabama Senator John Bankhead, the bill would focus on helping tenants own the farms on which they worked

⁶⁷ MacRae to Daniel C. Roper, 25 February 1935, Franklin P. Graham Papers, North Carolina Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

and would not bring new land into cultivation.⁶⁸ MacRae expressed support for the bill, calling it “a powerful vehicle for achieving the desired end,” but the bill was a far cry from MacRae’s original utopian vision, and it was framed in such a way as to mollify the agricultural interests, who had been against the conservationists’ aims since World War I.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, MacRae saw the bill as a good first step and remained optimistic that the time was ripe to “do something big for the South.”⁷⁰ Conference attendees seemed to agree.

By October, unable to convince Roosevelt to grant them a hearing, southern rural reformers, in a last ditch effort to see their plan to fruition, turned back to the Interior Department for possible action, although they tried to avoid dealing with Secretary Ickes. MacRae and two other former officials in the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, Alvin Johnson and Frank Fitts, wrote to Under Secretary Charles West with a proposal to create a Family Farmsteads Incorporated as a venture in southern colonization. In a follow up letter to West, Coker called the proposal “of the very greatest usefulness in rebuilding a decent rural civilization in the south,” and he called MacRae and the Southeastern Council the most experienced and capable organization in the South to carry out the program.⁷¹ However, the proposal was met with a deaf ear, and MacRae’s campaign to rebuild rural life in the South slowly lost its steam.

⁶⁸ “Minutes of the Conference on Rural Life, Washington, D. C., March 4, 1935,” Franklin P. Graham Papers, North Carolina Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; for Alabama Senator John Bankhead’s radio address regarding the Farm Tenant Homes Bill, see “Farm Tenant Homes Corporation Bill,” Franklin P. Graham Papers, North Carolina Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁶⁹ MacRae to Graham, 18 March 1935, Franklin P. Graham Papers, North Carolina Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁷⁰ “Minutes of the Conference on Rural Life, Washington, D. C., March 4, 1935,” Franklin P. Graham Papers, North Carolina Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill;

⁷¹ David R. Coker to Charles West, 3 October 1935, Franklin P. Graham Papers, North Carolina Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Despite the efforts of MacRae, Coker, Clarence Poe, E. C. Branson, E. C. Lindeman, H. C. Nixon, and countless other reformers, the 1930s revealed that powerful obstacles remained to the three-decades-long campaign for Farm City. Above all, it was hampered by the continued shift of conservation policy away from the original agrarianism of the Country Lifers.

Sarah T. Phillips has argued that the New Deal represented a break from previous conservation policy because it explicitly linked the well-being of rural life to conservation.⁷² However, by Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, the ideals of conservationists regarding rural life were somewhat different than those held by the Country Lifers. After a series of Interior Secretaries who at least gave lip service to preserving the yeomanry, Harold Ickes held no such illusions. He saw conservation in terms of: "First, protection of remarkable scenic areas by the establishment of national parks; second, the setting up of the national forest system; [and] third, Government protection of wildlife."⁷³ Although he did acknowledge the growing importance of soil conservation and indeed played a large role in securing the first soil conservation legislation, he held no pretensions about the need for Americans to remain connected to the soil. Improving American's access to land was not among the priorities of the new generation of conservationists. They were no longer concerned with maintaining a balance between urban and rural residents but, rather, between agriculture and industry. The difference was subtle, but the implications were broad. In essence, New Dealers did not explicitly link economic reform to social reform and, therefore, were not concerned,

⁷² See Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷³ Harold Ickes, "Conservation and Democracy," Speech before the 69th Annual Convention of the American Association of School Administrators, Cleveland, OH, 27 February 1939.

as MacRae was, with a broad “rural life” program. Instead, they focused on agriculture as an industry and closing the income gap between farmers and industrial workers.

Consequently, many reformers came to believe that this could only be secured “with a reduction in the number of farmers.”⁷⁴ Their solution to maladjusted agriculture was the Agricultural Adjustments Administration, which effectively accelerated the consolidation of agriculture, as it proved much more beneficial to large-scale agribusiness than the average smallholder. As historian Roger Biles has argued, “landowners prospered, and the landless suffered under the AAA.”⁷⁵ In short, the New Deal conservationists’ social vision had changed to reflect an acceptance of the industrial formation of the countryside.

New Dealers’ solution to soil exhaustion also revealed an abandonment of faith in the ability of the average smallholder to effectively husband the nation’s soil resources.⁷⁶ This followed a general shift in concern away from soil fertility and toward soil erosion. Throughout the 1920s, Hugh Bennett, working for the USDA’s Bureau of Chemistry and Soils, conducted extensive studies of soil erosion in the United States, concluding that it “is the most serious problem relating to land utilization in this country.”⁷⁷ Bennett, who would later help convince Congress to pass the Soil Erosion Act of 1935 creating the Soil Conservation Service and would serve as its first director, began pushing the idea that

⁷⁴ W. E. Grimes, “Goals in Conservation Policy,” *Journal of Farm Economics*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Feb., 1938), 250.

⁷⁵ For a discussion on the effects of the Agricultural Adjustments Administration on the South, see Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 38-56; see also Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 78-160. Daniel blames the AAA for delivering the final blow to the folk cultures that developed around cotton, tobacco, and rice cultivation; Jack Temple Kirby similarly blames the New Deal programs for ending the plantation system in the South. Instead of focusing on reform, the New Deal emphasized recovery in rebuilding southern agriculture, which effectively heralded the triumph of agribusiness; see Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 56-63.

⁷⁶ For an in-depth analysis of the New Deal’s Soil Conservation Service, see Robert J. Morgan, *Governing Soil Conservation: Thirty Years of the New Decentralization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1952), v-397.

⁷⁷ Hugh Hammond Bennett, “The Wasting Heritage of the Nation,” *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Aug., 1928), 97.

effective soil conservation required fewer lands in farming and fewer farmers on the land. In order to prevent further soil erosion, he called for the adoption of terracing practices, more extensive tillage, and planting cover crops such as legumes, but he acknowledged that “the increased cost has brought financial ruin to many farmers.”⁷⁸ He proposed a survey of the nation’s soils and called for marginal and sub-marginal farm lands to be taken out of cultivation and reforested.⁷⁹ In 1934, the USDA distributed maps to various state and federal agencies reflecting the latest soil surveys, and much to the consternation of Hugh MacRae, they labeled vast swaths of the southern coastal plain and the mountains as “submarginal lands.” MacRae called the categorization “one of the worst and most inexcusable handicaps that has ever come to my attention.”⁸⁰ Needless to say, colonization of reclaimed southern swamplands remained a distant dream.

Under Bennett’s guidance, the Soil Conservation Service came to epitomize the new relationship between agriculture and conservation, one based on the same centralized view of efficiency that took hold during World War I. Whereas Theodore Roosevelt, Liberty Hyde Bailey, and other Country Life conservationists realized that “the farmer must himself take the lead” and sought to use progressive education to build up the social and intellectual life around the soil, Ickes and Bennett used the federal bureaucracy to direct the movement according to centralized plans.⁸¹ They divided the nation into soil conservation districts and used regulations and financial incentives to entice farmers to either adopt conservation practices or abandon farming altogether. Donald Swain has

⁷⁸ Ibid, 123.

⁷⁹ Hugh Hammond Bennett, “Our Vanishing Farm Lands,” *The North American Review*, Vol. 228, No. 2 (Aug., 1929), 173-177.

⁸⁰ See Hugh MacRae to Josiah W. Bailey, 9 October 1934, MacRae Family Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

⁸¹ “Better Farm Life is Greatest Need Says Roosevelt,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 24 August 1910.

argued that by 1936, “soil conservation had become the primary method by which the federal government proposed to keep agricultural surpluses down,” and they kept them down by taking land out of cultivation.⁸² There was no emphasis on preserving the yeomanry. Rural life would have to find other industries to sustain it.

The New Dealers’ solution to rural life in the South was not in community planning but in regional planning administered by agencies like the Tennessee Valley Authority. Rather than balancing agriculture with industry in self-sufficient communities, the TVA proposed such a balance within the entire region. Resembling more of the southern regionalist school led by Howard W. Odum and less the Southern Agrarians, W. R. Woolrich, head of the TVA’s Agriculture Industry Division, remarked that the purpose of the TVA was to provide “a regional demonstration of agricultural and industrial development coordinated to provide the maximum benefits to the largest number of the region’s inhabitants.”⁸³ New Dealers were intimately concerned with improving rural life, but their solution was to plan for the decentralization of industry into rural areas. While large farmers would be encouraged by domestic allotment plans, such as those administered by the AAA, farmers of marginal and submarginal lands must find work in industry. In other words, New Dealers did not hope to maintain an independent yeomanry. Unwilling to challenge the position of agribusiness, they sought to bring more Americans into the capitalist, wage-earning fold.

In addition to the inhospitable national mood towards the idea of Farm City, Census reports from 1935 confirmed that greater hurdles existed to an agrarian revival. Farmers were not taking the initiative to organize their communities, as optimistic

⁸² Swain, *Federal Conservation Policy, 1921-1933*, 153.

⁸³ W. R. Woolrich, “Adjusting Industry to Agricultural Communities,” *Mountain Life and Work*, January 1935, 25.

commentators had hoped. Although the number of total farmers in the South grew by 3.1 percent since 1930 due to the effects of the depression, most of those farmers had moved to the suburbs of large cities, and a sizeable minority had moved onto submarginal lands, which had been recommended for agricultural retirement by soil conservationists. In the prime agricultural areas in the South, meanwhile, the farm population had declined by 2.5 percent. These statistics show that small farmers in general, having been pushed out of many rural areas and off the good farmlands by the ongoing agricultural consolidation, were not turning to their own communities for support and cooperation. They were moving toward the lights of the city, its markets, its opportunities, and its social life. The statistics also show that these suburban farmers were overwhelmingly white, as black farmers were abandoning their farms for the city itself.⁸⁴ Those who remained in the country increasingly found themselves on lands deemed “too poor to provide adequate family living and support public institutions and service.”⁸⁵ While these trends were not particularly new, they revealed that despite Americans’ “back-to-the-soil” rhetoric during the Great Depression, the obstacles in front of MacRae and the agrarian reformers were as palpable as ever.

Indeed, the South remained pitifully behind the rest of the nation in the development of cooperative institutions. In his 1939 study on the subject, Charles Smith of the University of North Carolina, lamented that “the cooperative movement has made

⁸⁴ While the overall farm population in the South increased 3.1 percent, that increase came wholly from white farmers. The white farm population increased 6.6 percent, and the black farm population decreased 3.9 percent. The total farm population located within 25 miles of a large city (over 100,000) had increased by 19 percent, including a 68 percent increase around the Atlanta area. This includes a 25 percent increase in the white farm population and only a 5 percent increase in the black farm population. The farm population on submarginal lands, meanwhile, increased 11 percent. In North Carolina, those submarginal lands were almost exclusively located in the mountains; T. Lynn Smith, “Recent Changes in the Farm Population of the Southern States,” *Social Forces*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Mar., 1937), 391-401.

⁸⁵ *Report of the National Resources Board*, Washington, D. C., December 1934, 176; quoted in *Ibid*, 397.

only negligible progress in this region.”⁸⁶ Only 9 percent of farmers in the southeast conducted business through cooperatives in 1939, he reported, compared with 38 percent in the Midwest and 37 percent in the far West.⁸⁷ Smith speculated that the deficiency was due to the region’s lack of immigrants with cooperative experience and to the relatively high percentage of tenancy, but it can also be attributed to the persistent racial divide and the general conservatism of the region’s rural population. Farmers in general were resistant to the idea of cooperation because many of them farmed alongside those of a different race, and MacRae, Couch, and others believed reorganizing farmers into segregated communities would have removed this obstacle to cooperation. However, the experience of Penderlea demonstrated that this theory was difficult to work out in practice. Poor southern farmers simply did not know how to cooperate in a democratic community, and furthermore, even in a planned all-white community like Penderlea, it was hard to divorce farming from black labor.

Sometime between 1936 and 1938, Muriel Wolff, working for the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Writers Project, lived at Penderlea for a few weeks, interviewing many of the residents. In an intimate glimpse inside the lives of many of the settlers, she recorded an atmosphere of discontent that resembled nothing of the rural paradise envisioned by MacRae. Country Life conservationists believed that the strengthening of community life would resurrect a democratic spirit in the countryside as people came together for educational, spiritual, government, and social pursuits, but at Penderlea, that democratic spirit was entirely lacking. Settlers complained about a lack of active co-operatives, a dearth of local markets, mounting debt, and a leadership that

⁸⁶ Charles M. Smith, “Observations on Regional Differential in Cooperative Organization,” *Social Forces*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (May 1944), 437.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

seemed to care little for the well-being of the settlers. On the surface, officials could point to a community newsletter, a baseball team, church groups, and women's clubs, as evidence that the community was coming together, but Wolff's interviews suggested that there remained a wide chasm between the "officials" and the settlers, a disconnect that contributed to suspicion, jealousy, and distrust. Many settlers saw the community center as a part of "officialdom" and the project manager as a disinterested despot who lived somewhere else and refused to allow settlers control over their own bank accounts. He required them to prepare annual budgets for supplies and clothing and demanded that they grow all of the food they needed. The teachers in the community school also lived apart from the settlers and viewed them as low brow welfare recipients, the same view taken by the projects' neighbors in the surrounding countryside.⁸⁸

The lack of a democratic culture was partially due to the hierarchical nature of the community government with the settlers on the bottom and a clear chain of command leading through the project manager up to the President's cabinet, but it was also due to the fact that the settlers themselves largely did not buy into the community idea, viewing Penderlea as a place to leave as soon as they could save up a little money. They could not transcend their self-interests. They formed cliques, gossiped incessantly, refused to participate in recreational activities, and generally did not take part in making governing decisions.⁸⁹ There were at least a few settlers who tried to develop a democratic spirit, and they blamed the settlers themselves for not taking charge of their own destiny. One man ridiculed the conservatism of most of the farmers, telling Wolff, "you can't tell these farmers at Penderlea anything...When I get up in meetings, trying to be helpful, and tell

⁸⁸ Wolff, "Penderlea," Fol. 806, Federal Writers Project Archives, 1936-1940, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

what I've found is a good thing to do, they just laugh. They don't want to know anything."⁹⁰ Another man who enjoyed life at Penderlea and spoke up regularly at meetings, called his fellow settlers "a bunch of sheep, ignorant as hell."⁹¹ He criticized them for not participating in community activities and decisions and looking with disdain upon any progressive ideas. He told Wolff that people made fun of him and his wife for doing things "by the book," including raising their son according to information in the government bulletins. "They joke and think it's queer, [but]...all you have to do is look at David and then look at some of these spindly kids around here to know which has had the best kind of raising."⁹² While there is no doubt that the bureaucratized governance of the community hindered the development of a community consciousness, it is also clear that the settlers' conservatism was a formidable obstacle.

Wolff's interviews also revealed that even in all-white Penderlea, the racial divide might have kept the farmers from developing an effective system of cooperatives. For example, the strawberries that many Penderleans had come to rely on for a cash crop were largely sold at a market in nearby Burgaw, not through a cooperative. Wolff reported that not only were most of the strawberries in Penderlea harvested by black pickers, but at the market, many of the sellers were black. The white buyers, mostly middlemen who then sold the strawberries to grocers in Wilmington, paid much less for the strawberries of black farmers. In at least two cases recorded by Wolff, black farmers received about half as much for their strawberries as Wolff's white host. For a cooperative to be effective in such a market and prevent some farmers from consistently undercutting the prices demanded by the cooperative, it would require the cooperation of

⁹⁰ Ibid, 43.

⁹¹ Ibid, 53.

⁹² Ibid, 54.

both races, and Wolff's interviews illustrate that the settlers' racism had not diminished. Her white host, for example, referring to the black strawberry pickers, asserted coldly that "Niggers don't have any morals."⁹³ Lacking the cooperative spirit, Penderlea farmers continued to take their chances as individuals on the open market.

Over the next five years, as Penderlea was shuffled from the Division of Subsistence Homesteads to the Resettlement Administration to the Farm Security Administration, the direction of the community steadily drifted away from MacRae's original dream of a Farm City. The community was largely completed by 1936, and the first real wave of settlers entered their new homes unsure about the future of the project and its leadership. By 1937, some 112 families had been settled, and the Resettlement Administration expanded the project to encompass nearly 10,000 acres. However, farmers continued to remain deeply in debt with little hope of paying off their original loans. In a move that signaled the further shift away from the ideals of Farm City, the Farm Security Administration opened a hosiery mill at Penderlea in 1938 with the hopes of providing extra income through manufacturing work. By the end of World War II, however, many of the original homesteaders had moved away from Penderlea, and the property was liquidated. Although some of the original settlers would secure loans to purchase their homesteads after the war, it was no longer the social experiment that MacRae had hoped.⁹⁴

World War II delivered the *coup de grace* to the co-operative community movement in the South. The calls for farm villages had been all but undercut by the dismal record of the federal homesteads projects. Most of the three dozen communities

⁹³ Ibid, 58.

⁹⁴ Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 287-289.

created by the New Deal limped along until the war, but by the time peace was declared, they had all been liquidated. High costs, low morale, and a political climate that became increasingly hostile to the idea of planned communities rendered their continuance untenable.⁹⁵ In addition, many farmers on the projects promptly left their farms when opportunities arose in the war industries, and when the war came to a close, it became clear that postwar policy had no room for rural reorganization. As Congress began considering what to do with returning soldiers, for example, there was little interest in placing them on the land, as had been the case with most previous wars. Calling the soldier settlement bills after World War I, “ill-conceived and ill-fated,” John D. Black and Charles Hyson argued that the lesson learned from them, as well as the subsistence homesteads programs, was that group settlement did not work. Farmers should instead look to get individual loans under the provision of the G. I. Bill.⁹⁶ Carl C. Taylor, one of the early supporters of MacRae’s Farm City, agreed. Only the most competent and energetic veterans should enter the competitive agriculture industry after the war, he wrote. “None of them should be clouded by romantic or utopian notions about the ease with which a battle- or camp-weary soldier can live on a farm and succeed in agriculture.”⁹⁷ Moreover, federal agricultural policy grew even more hostile to the idea of subsistence villages. Robert Harrison, a member of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Southeastern Regional Postwar Planning Committee, blatantly stated that

⁹⁵ In 1934, Dr. William Wirt, an Indiana school superintendent testified at a highly publicized congressional hearing in which he accused M. L. Wilson, Rexford Tugwell, and others of “subverting the social system” of the United States; see, for example, John Boettiger, “Tugwell Names by Dr. Wirt as Revolt Leader,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 11 April 1934; see also Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 327-337.

⁹⁶ Interestingly, Black was the same person who testified in favor of the Black Bills in 1932 that would have created farm colonies for unemployed workers; John D. Black and Charles Hyson, “Postwar Soldier Settlement,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (Nov., 1944), 1-35.

⁹⁷ Carl C. Taylor, “The Veteran in Agriculture,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 238, Postwar Jobs for Veterans (Mar., 1945), 48-55.

“The success of Southeastern agriculture clearly depends upon successful plans for reducing the number of subsistence farms, raising the level of efficiency of commercial farms (usually through enlargement of operations), and reducing the number and proportion of unskilled laborers dependent on agriculture.”⁹⁸ The moment for planned co-operative communities had passed. The campaign for Farm City was over.

The campaign for Farm City entered the 1930s with considerable promise. As the South passed into the Modernist era, a new generation of southerners embraced the utopian ideal with the fervor that the Country Life conservationists had a decade or more earlier, and much of the idealism of the Progressive conservation movement found a regional home in the South. The support provided by this new group of southern Modernists further suggests that the utopian idea of Farm City and the conservation agrarianism it embodied was not a rear-guard action against Modernity. It was a way for southern Modernists to come to terms with the social and economic realities of industrial capitalism. By the mid-1930s, it was, in Couch’s words, the “only way” that “the family-size farm can be made a safe and permanent economic unit.”⁹⁹ While they did not desire the life of a yeoman farmer for themselves, they nevertheless valued “his” attachment to the land as an anchor in the constantly changing and volatile capitalist economy. They ultimately agreed with George Perkins Marsh that a stable population on the land would nurture a stable relationship with nature, and the campaign for Farm City was perhaps the last real attempt to see that vision to a political reality. Its failure signaled the beginning of a new era in which securing the yeomanry seemed no longer politically feasible.

⁹⁸ Robert Harrison, “Land Improvement vs. Land Settlement for the Southeast,” *Southern Economic Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Jul., 1945), 30.

⁹⁹ Couch, *An Agrarian Programme for the South*, 324.

EPILOGUE

A PARABLE FOR THE FUTURE

In 1995, eminent environmental historian William Cronon published a provocative essay entitled, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” Although a fan of wilderness areas and national parks, Cronon argued that America’s preoccupation with wilderness was obscuring the debate that should be taking place over the nation’s future: how to approach the problem of sustainable development. “[W]e mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can be the solution to our culture’s problematic relationships with the nonhuman world,” he wrote.¹ For his essay, Cronon drew the ire of wilderness enthusiasts who held a spiritual attachment to wild nature and deeply concurred with Henry David Thoreau’s memorable statement, “In Wildness is the preservation of the world.” For his essay, Cronon must be applauded. Without discounting the significant role that wilderness continues to play in the ecological health of the nation and the mental health of nature-minded Americans, the

¹ William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 70.

attention of modern conservationists must be directed to other ends. They must continue to search for ways to bring human life and society into harmony with the natural world.

In his 1922 *Story of Utopias*, Lewis Mumford argues that everyone has a utopia, a vision of the good life, in their minds. He divides utopian thought into two categories: utopias of escape and utopias of reconstruction. For many conservation-minded Americans, the natural world has become a utopia of escape, a place where one can leave the modern world behind and delve into a pre-modern Eden for a couple of nights. While public lands should certainly continue to provide this utopia of escape, more Americans should expand their imaginations to envision more utopias of reconstruction. That is to say, they should imagine communities that address the real-world relationships between labor, society, and the environment. Mumford lamented in 1922 that Americans were turning to a new kind of utopia, the “Country House,” and the implications for community life were dire. “Culture [has come] to mean not a participation in the creative activities of one’s own community,” he wrote, “but the acquisition of the products of other communities,” and as a result, “there remains no other community than a multitude of anarchic individuals.”² The Country House, or what has become the suburban house, has led to “an enormously wasteful duplication of the apparatus of consumption.”³ Because the same holds true today, future utopias of reconstruction must work to counteract the “Country House” mentality and give Americans other options of more sustainable living. As pressure on the world’s resources mount, it will become increasingly imperative.

² Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), 205-209.

³ Ibid. For more on Mumford’s views on community and the loss of it, see Casey Nelson Blake, *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

Farm City may not be the answer, but something like it could be. As backward-looking and overly idealistic as it may seem to some observers, it can be said, with a reasonable degree of skepticism, that it was ahead of its time. MacRae and other supporters of Farm City had initially hoped to establish the co-operative farming community as the dominant form of rural culture, and although that dream died relatively quickly, the same ideas have continued to thrive among some circles of conservation-minded liberals. Arthur E. Morgan, the conservationist first director of the TVA, continued the Country Life conservationist vision when, in 1937, he founded the Celo Community in the mountains of Yancey County, North Carolina. His goal was to establish an independent community in which its members could “maintain a considerable degree of freedom from the pressures and compulsions of the going economic regime, with the aim of using that freedom to try to orient themselves to the economic world in ways that would be in harmony with what they considered to be fundamental ethical considerations.”⁴ He did not consider Celo to be “a retreat from life, but an adventure in living.”⁵

Although his idea was clearly influenced by Hugh MacRae—he acknowledged that MacRae’s colonies had been “highly successful under more adverse conditions than those which obtained at Celo”—he ultimately decided not to pursue the same plan, citing different circumstances facing his community. Like MacRae’s colonies, Celo got its start from the generous financial contribution of a wealthy philanthropist, William Regnery from Chicago, but unlike MacRae, who had hoped to establish a business model with his

⁴ Arthur E. Morgan, “Notes from memory by Arthur E. Morgan and Griscom Morgan on the Beginnings of the Celo Community in North Carolina, October 7, 1957,” W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Special Collections, Appalachian State University, Boone, N. C.

⁵ Ibid.

colonies, Morgan founded Celo as a non-profit organization and was able to place settlers on the land with little demand for financial returns. He also held a different philosophy on community building. Instead of enforcing a vision for community organization, he recruited able settlers who displayed “considerateness, absence of bitterness, jealousy and excessive self-seeking,” and he allowed them to develop their own institutions and culture. “It was our belief that life is too complex and too large to fit into any formal ideology,” he wrote in 1957. “[I]f sincere, normal people will work together in reasonableness, they will make day by day and year by year decisions which will tend to emerge into something like a desirable pattern. Naturally some elements of common philosophy and policy will gradually develop.”⁶ Largely due to its organic nature, the Celo Community remains today as one of the longest lasting of what have since been called “intentional communities.”⁷

The intentional community movement was invigorated by the 1960s counterculture when thousands of young people flocked to the countryside seeking an alternative to what they saw as the steady march of materialism, consumerism, and environmental destruction. While their motives varied, they were generally searching for a more fulfilling way of living based on a more sustainable relationship with the earth and better human relationships. If the simple life can be made more socially and intellectually rewarding, they maintained, then society could be brought back into a sustainable balance with the Earth. The intentional community movement is still growing. The Fellowship of Intentional Communities, an organization founded in 1986 but with roots that stretch back to Arthur Morgan, maintains a directory of more than

⁶ Ibid, 10.

⁷ For more on the Celo Community, see George L. Hicks, *Experimental Americans: Celo and Utopian Community in the Twentieth Century* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

3,000 such communities, up from 300 in 1990, varying in character from conservation-based housing developments to nearly self-sufficient homesteading settlements.⁸ These communities, according to the FIC's web site, are "pioneers in sustainable living, personal and community transformation, and peaceful social evolution."⁹

The 1960s also witnessed the origins of the organic farming movement, as conservationists began developing ways to make agriculture more sustainable. Since then, the organic farming movement has grown and expanded, and today, a form of agrarianism called "conservation-based agriculture" has become one of the central tenets of the modern environmental movement.¹⁰ These reformers believe industrial farming is destroying the environment and people's health through increased greenhouse gas emissions required for shipping, the destruction of biodiversity, and use of harmful chemicals and fertilizers that have made their way into the Gulf of Mexico and created dead zones. An increasing number of them also believe that putting more people on the land will lead to a more sustainable relationship with the earth in general and bring stability and prosperity to a rural America that has lost its ability to generate wealth. Inspired by writers and poets such as Wendell Berry, many of them champion a type of agrarianism that is reminiscent of the Country Life conservationists. Echoing the vision of Liberty Hyde Bailey, Hugh MacRae, E. C. Branson, Clarence Nixon, and the other supporters of the idea of Farm City, Berry hopes to see "the world's farmers, ranchers, and foresters...live in stable, locally adapted, resource-preserving communities, and I

⁸ Fellowship for Intentional Communities, "Community Directory," <http://directory.ic.org/> [accessed March 11, 2012].

⁹ Fellowship for Intentional Communities, "The Fellowship for Intentional Community's Non-profit Purposes," <http://fic.ic.org/purposes.php> [accessed March 11, 2004].

¹⁰ The Union of Concerned Scientists has identified industrial agriculture as one of the primary threats to "our environment, our climate, our bodies, and our rural economies;" Union of Concerned Scientists, "Food and Agriculture: Toward Healthy Food and Farms," http://www.ucsusa.org/food_and_agriculture/ [accessed March 12, 2012].

want them to thrive.”¹¹ He has reenergized the idea of the farmer as the frontline conservationist, arguing that a return of the yeomanry would mean a “higher ratio of caretakers to acres, of care to use.”¹² If more people lived in communities full of small, organic farmers and largely self-sufficient in food production, and if these people could enjoy the simple, agrarian community life, he believes, the world would be a more stable, peaceful, diverse, and environmentally friendly place. Berry and the conservation agrarians are attempting nothing less than the rolling back of a century-long trend of agricultural consolidation.

The new conservation agrarian movement with its emphasis on consumption seems to be succeeding in stimulating another back-to-the-farm movement. The number of farmer’s markets has risen from just 340 in 1970 to more than 7,000 today. There are also more than 4,000 farms operating under the principles of Community Supported Agriculture, in which community members buy upfront a share of the farm’s annual produce.¹³ In the eyes of many observers, the new conservationist attitude toward farming and the growth of demand for locally grown food has drawn more young people to farming. “I will predict that in the next [USDA] census, the number of people that are energized and getting into farming has grown,” Charlie Jackson, executive director of Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, remarked in 2011. “There is a generation coming back to the farm.”¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid, 4.

¹² Wendell Berry, “Conservationist and Agrarian,” in Daniel Imhoff and Jo Ann Baumgartner, ed., *Farming and the Fate of Wild Nature* (Healdsburg, Calif.: Watershed Media, 2006), 6.

¹³ Union of Concerned Scientists, “Market Forces: Creating Jobs through Public Investment in Local and Regional Food Systems, Executive Summary,” http://www.ucsusa.org/assets/documents/food_and_agriculture/market-forces-exec-summary.pdf [accessed March 12, 2012].

¹⁴ James Shea, “WNC Experiencing ‘A Generation Coming Back to the Farm’ with Blossoming of Small Farms Selling Directly to Consumers,” *Carolina Public Press*,

This thesis has been a project in history written with a purpose. Although it is often said that historians make poor policymakers, they can nevertheless play an important role in shaping the future. William Cronon has stated that the best an environmental historian can hope for is to offer parables that can help interpret what is happening or what may happen in the future.¹⁵ The parable of Hugh MacRae and Farm City can certainly help inform the modern environmental movement. As part of the last attempt by the federal government to build organized communities, it presents something of a cautionary tale. Perhaps the most important lesson that can be drawn from MacRae's experience with Penderlea is that any push to organize independent, sustainable communities must not rely on the government, for it can play only a limited role. Nor should it rely on rigid theories of social engineering, as the parable of Celo can attest. Community cannot be imposed from the top down on people who do not understand the environmental implications or who do not support the same social vision. It must truly come from the grassroots, and it requires greater global awareness and a reformer's zeal, local leaders willing to invest in the community, and community members who take an active part in community development. The recent "back-to-the-farm" movement and the Intentional Community movement offer an encouraging parable that reinforces this lesson. Indeed, they are achieving goals, albeit modest goals, that the Country Life conservationists could not.

<http://www.carolinapublicpress.org/5024/wnc-experiencing-generation-returning-to-farm-with-blossoming-of-small-farms-selling-directly-to-consumers#comments> [accessed March 12, 2012].

¹⁵ See Cronon, "The Uses of Environmental History," *Environmental History Review*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Autumn, 1993), 1-22.

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